

- RELIQUIAE TENEBRAE -

MYSTERIUM CONTAGIOSUM

PROJECT ANGELBOOK - VOLUME XII - PART 20



2.DNA



GA-DNA

16+

16+



1.DNA

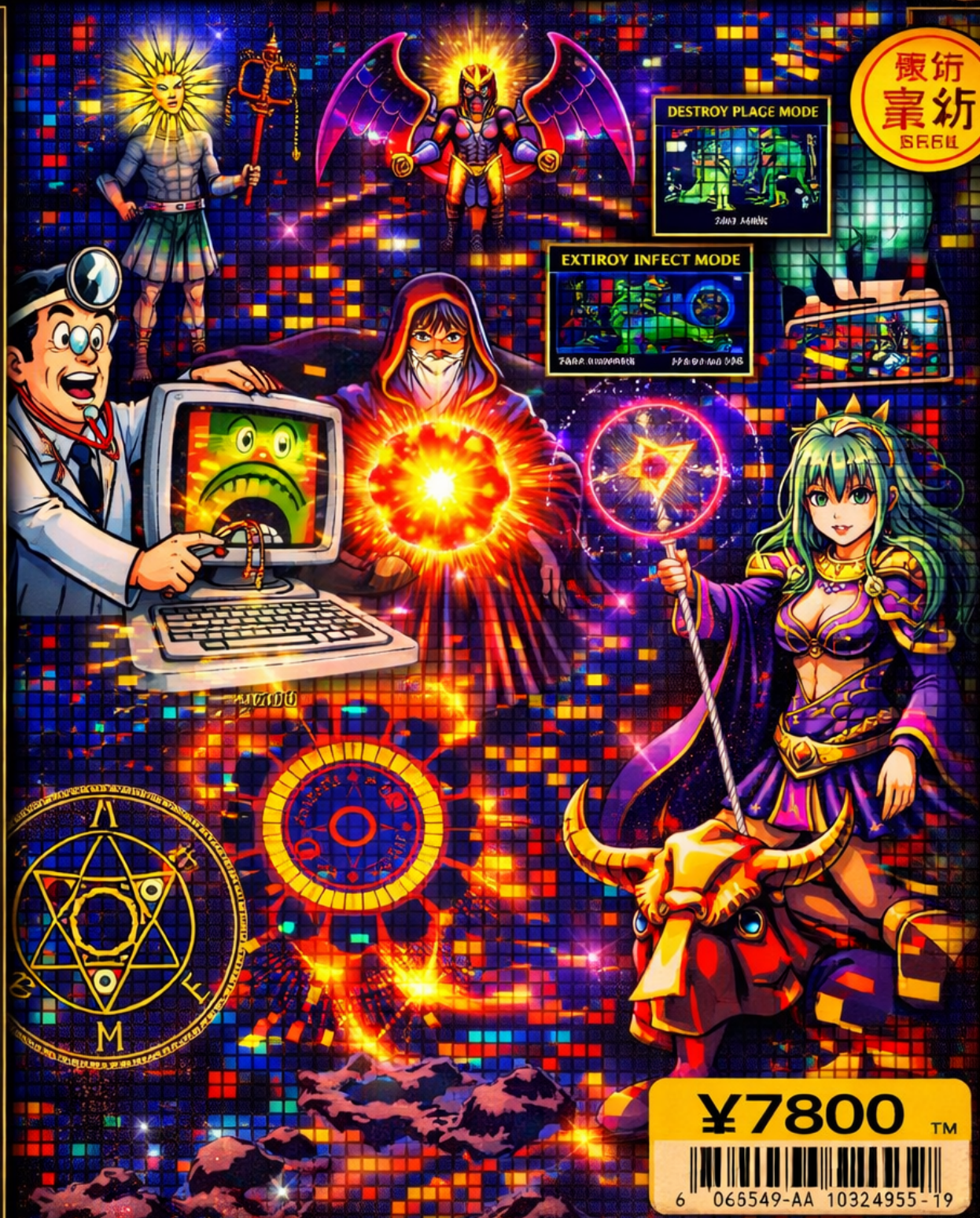


3 DNA



1.7.0

2.0.0



殲
絶
事
業
SEEL

DESTROY PLAGE MODE

EXTIROY INFECT MODE

¥7800 TM

6 06549-AA 10324955-19

EZEKIEL REDIK YARBROUGH

Reliquiae Tenebrae – Mysterium
Contagiosum – Project AngelBook –
Volume XII – Part 20
By Ezekiel Redik Yarbrough (DBM
ECLIPZE)

Liminal Archivist's Note

On the Preservation of Distorted Gnosis and the Dying Digital Veil

There is a strange ache that comes from spending all day in the ruins of spiritual memory.

Fifty books made in one day—an inhuman output—should feel like a triumph. But when the source material is splintered, hostile, and drenched in egoic inversion, what remains is not pride... but hollowness.

This volume, like many in this phase, is not composed of my own words.

It is an act of preservation, not expression.

It is a documentation of liminal knowledge, scraped from a dying web—the final breath of spiritual forums, parapsychology ephemera, early occultist blogs, and yes, even the darker corridors of modern satanic movements.

And herein lies the tension:

Much of what is presented under the name Satanism is a distorted half-truth.

It correctly identifies that Yahweh is not the Most High, and in this way, it mirrors certain Gnostic insights—

but then it derails into ego exaltation, materialism, and psychic hostility. It gets halfway to freedom... and then builds a new prison out of flame and shadow.

And yet—

amidst the mockery, venom, and inversions,

there are real spiritual technologies embedded in the code.

Meditation techniques, psychic development maps, astral awareness, breath control, and ritual frameworks.

Not all of it is corrupted.

Some of it is usable tech.

Some of it may be ancient... wearing a new mask.

So I do not endorse what is preserved here.

But I also refuse to let it vanish into untraceable digital decay.

This is an act of containment as much as curation.

I name this phase liminal, because I know it will not last.

There is only so much of the old internet left to preserve.

Only so much unindexed gnosis hiding behind broken blog links and .org forums that haven't been cached since 2012.

When this phase ends, and I return to creation, I will draw from this tomb of fragments with clarity and discernment.

But for now, I am the one who stands in the gateway—

Archiving the bones, sealing the jars, lighting one gold-lettered candle above a chamber of shadows.

To the reader: proceed with awareness.

This is not scripture.

This is sediment.

It is archived because it is dangerous.

And dangerous knowledge, when preserved with respect, often becomes a mirror for deeper truth.

—Ezekiel Redik Yarbrough

Liminal Phase – Discretio Luminis

notebook relating to Birthday Letters, contains many drafts of poems un-numbered in any way. By my count, and not allowing for drafts which may have been changed extensively in the final version, only 22 of these appear in the published sequence.

A Buff school exercise book (column 11) inscribed by a student “Langford. Scripture” contains two un-numbered Birthday Letters poems. And a Folio book with a fine printed cover (column 12) contains fourteen un-numbered Birthday Letters poems.

One of the most organised of Ted’s lists of poems is in a Buff school exercise book to the cover of which he has applied a yellow tape cross (column 15). Here, he lists poem titles and numbers them consecutively from 1 to 125. Some titles have been marked ‘Lost’, most titles have been ticked and several have been re-numbered. A note at the end of the list records that 12 or 13 poems are lost and suggests that this “= 1 book”. 45 of these poems appear in Birthday Letters but in different order. Also in this file are many numbered notes, mostly about Sylvia; many loose sheets; and a mind-map listing episodes in Sylvia’s life which are recognisable in many of the poems.

Two further school exercise books contain lists of poems. A blue book on which a student has written “P.Hunt – Histry(sic)” (column 16) contains poems numbered consecutively by Ted from 1 to 61. Most are crossed through, some re-numbered, and a note indicates that 21 pieces are “lost” which “= 2 books”, then a further note says “all found”. Only 29 of these poems listed in this book appear in Birthday Letters but in a different order.

A pink school notebook labelled “Staff. Autumn 1962” and with a large hand-written X beside this (column 13), contains poems which Ted has numbered from 1 to 61, then has re-numbered (often in red). Many have a question marks alongside them and a number of titles have been crossed through. 37 of these poems appear in the published sequence, again in a quite different order; and 5 of the poems appeared in the first edition of Howls & Whispers. This particular file also contains many hand-written and typed manuscripts on loose sheets. The date on the cover offers no guidance, since the notebook lists ‘Resemblances’, which in drafts elsewhere in the archive describes Ted’s sightings of Sylvia after her death in 1964 and which eventually became the poem, ‘Last Offers’.

As far as I can determine, there are a number of poems which are in the published sequence but do not appear in Ted’s notebooks or lists. These include ‘The Literary Life’, ‘Astringency’, ‘Perfect Light’, ‘Blood and Innocence’, ‘The Cast’ and ‘The Ventriloquist’. Others – ‘Trophies’, ‘Horoscope’, ‘The Bird’, ‘Setebos’, ‘The Hands’, ‘Freedom of Speech’ and ‘Picture of Otto’, for example, – appear only in drafts which have some slight resemblance the final, very different, published versions of the poems.

The only other guidance we have to the way in which Ted finally chose the sequence in which the Birthday Letters poems were published, is in a list which he sent to Christopher Reid at Faber & Faber, dated 28 August 1997. This list contains poem titles numbered from 1 to 85, consecutively but with inserted titles and many arrows moving

poems to different positions in the list. The order is close to, but not the same as that in the published sequence. Four poems – ‘the Afterbirth’, ‘The Rabbit Catcher’, ‘Costly Speech’ and ‘Telos’ – are included at the end of the list, numbered but marked “unplaced”. Three of the published poems – ‘18 Rugby Street’, ‘The Pink Wool Knitted Dress’ and ‘Karlsbad caverns’ – do not appear in the list at all.

Notes and References

1. Huges,T. Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, Faber, 1992. p.33.
2. British Library Ms. 88918/12/4.
3. Hughes,T, op.cit. p.20-21.
4. British Library Ms. 88918/12/1.
5. British Library Ms. 88918/1/17. Inside the front cover of this book Ted has written “Begin today” and inscribed a symbol which looks like the Hebrew alphabet letter TAV (which means ‘The Seal of Creation’ and represents faith in Divine presence in the finite world. (<https://www.inner.org/HEBLETER/tav.htm>).
6. Roy Davids misreads 8S and 6S as 85 and 65 respectively in his notes on the boxes sold to the British Library.
7. Duczynak,I. and Polanyi,K.(Eds), The Plough and the Pen: Writing from Hungary 1930-1956, Translator: McRobbie,K., Introduction by W.H.Auden, who describes the poem as ‘one of the greatest poems written in my time’.
8. Weissbort,D. Ted Hughes: Selected Translations, Faber, 2006. p.24. Ted’s translation of Juhász’s poem is published in full; and the first lines of a translation made by David Wevill for Penguin’s Modern European Poets series in 1970, are included in an Appendix.
9. Huges,T. Tales From Ovid, Faber, 1997. p.108.
10. Graves,R. The White Goddess, Faber, 1977. pp.54 and 251.
11. Reid,C.(Ed.) Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. p.394.
12. Reid, ibid. p.719.
13. The text of this hymn can be found on the website of Project Guttenberg at Guttenberg.org, under ‘Selections from Irish Poetry/ Religious Poems’.
14. Makkai, A.(Ed.), In Quest of the Miracle Stag: the Poetry of Hungary, Chicago: Atlantis-Centaur, 1996.

15. See my detailed analysis of Cave Birds in my book *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, UNE, 1994; and my paper on Cabbala in Adam and the Sacred Nine.

16. I trace this close relationship in detail in *Birthday Letters: Poetry and Magic*.

17. Hughes, T. op.cit. p.33.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document or of any document linked to this page contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Strict Addendum (31 August 2017) to 'Notes on the British Library's Birthday Letters Archive'

© Ann Skea.

In my notes on the British Library's Birthday Letters archive, I discuss, amongst other things, several works which may have prompted Hughes to choose 'The Sorrows of the Deer' as his earliest title for Birthday Letters. Namely, Robert Graves's 'the Roebuck in the Thicket' in *The White Goddess*; Ferenc Juhász's poem 'The Boy Changed into a Stag Cries out at the Gate of Secrets'; and St Patrick's Hymn, 'The Deer's Cry'.

Now, a paper by Marianne Kumari, whilst having nothing to do with Hughes' work, has alerted me to two further, very strong possible influences on Hughes' choice of title (Kumari, 'Hamlet's "stricken deer": a pointed reference to Gli Eroi Furori and the execution of Giordano Bruno', *Academia.com*, 2017).

Kumari discusses the symbol of the "stricken deer" in several of Shakespeare's plays, most notably in *Hamlet*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. She links these references to the life and work of Renaissance philosopher, mathematician, poet and Platonist, Giordano Bruno, in whose *Gli Eroi Furori* the myth of Actaeon and Diana becomes a metaphor for the passionate search by the heroic lover for Divine Eternal Truth.

Most notable for reference to a stricken deer are the following:

Hamlet (III.ii. 272–4):

Hamlet's bitterly ironic remark to Horatio when Claudius flees after watching a performance of Hamlet's play, *The Mouse Trap*:

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch, while some must sleep:
So runs the world away—
As You Like It (II.i.34-41):

The First Lord describes to the Duke a wounded stag and Jaques's identification with the creature. Hughes, in his own lengthy discussion of Jaques (SGCB 101–8), writes of Jaques as “something of a self–portrait [of Shakespeare] (not so much a self–portrait as a way of Shakespeare having self–representation in the ritual [ie the active ritual drama of the play cf. SGCB 107]”:

First Lord The melancholy Jaques grieves at that:

...

To–day my Lord of Amiens and myself
Did steal behind him as he lay along
Under an oak whose antique root peeps out
Upon the brook that brawls along this wood:
To the which place a poor sequester'd stag
That from the hunter's aim had ta'en a hurt
Did come to languish; and indeed my lord
The wretched animal heav'd forth such groans
That their discharge did stretch his leathern coat
Almost to bursting; and the big round tears
Cours'd one another down his innocent nose
In piteous chase;

...

Duke: But what said Jaques?
Did he not moralize this spectacle?
First Lord: O, yes, into a thousand similes.

...

Duke: And did you leave him in this contemplation?
First Lord: We did, my lord, weeping and commenting
Upon the sobbing deer.

And, in particular, from *Gli Eroici Furori*, Giordano Bruno's description of Actaeon's transformation and his comments on its meaning:

To the woods, the mastiffs and the greyhounds young Actaeon leads,
When destiny directs him into the doubtful and neglected way,
Upon the track of savage beasts in forests wild.
And here, between the waters, he sees a bust and face more beautiful than e'er was
seen

By mortal or divine, of scarlet, alabaster, and fine gold;
He sees, and the great hunter straight becomes that which he hunts.
The stag, that towards still thicker shades now goes with lighter steps,
His own great dogs swiftly devour.

“Actaeon” writes Bruno, “signifies the intellect, intent on the pursuit of divine wisdom and the comprehension of divine beauty”.... “ So Actaeon with those thoughts – those dogs – which hunted outside themselves for goodness, wisdom, and beauty, thus came into the presence of the same, and ravished out of himself by so much splendour, he became the prey, saw himself converted into that for which he was seeking, and perceived, that of his dogs or thoughts, he himself came to be the longed–for prey”

(<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19817/19817-h/19817-h.htm#Thirdp.94>) .

Hughes was very familiar with all of these works. And Birthday Letters, as I have argued elsewhere, was his own *Eroici Furori* – a passionate and heroic expression of his search for truth and of his dedication to the Goddess. In that search, as some of the *vacanas* in which he addresses his Lady of the Hill show, he must often have felt like Actaeon pursued by his/her hounds. See, for example, some of the Epilogue poems in *Gaudete*, THCP 357-375.

© Ann Skea 2017. For permission to quote any part of this document or of any document linked to this page contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage
Valid XHTML 1.0 StrictPhoenix
Adam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama
© Ann Skea.

"The whole drift is an alchemising of a phoenix out of a serpent. An awakened life out of an unawakened"

(Letter from Ted Hughes to Keith Sagar. 23 April 1980).

PART 1

'Adam'(THCP 443)
'Awake'(THCP 443)
'The Song'(THCP 444)
'All this time his cry'(THCP 444)
'He had retreated'(THCP 444-5)

PART 2

'And the Falcon came'(THCP 445)
'The Skylark came'(THCP 445-6)
'The Wild Duck'(THCP 446)
'The Swift comes the swift'(THCP 447)
'The Unknown Wren'(THCP 447-8)

PART 3

'And Owl'(THCP 448-9)
'The Dove Came'(THCP 449)
'The Crow came to Adam'(THCP 449)
'And the Phoenix has come'(THCP 450)
'Light'(THCP 450-1)
'Bud-tipped twig'(THCP 451)

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document or of any

document linked to this page contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Strict WrenWild Duck

Adam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama.

Part 1: 'Adam' 'The Song' 'Awake' 'All this time his cry' 'He had retreated'

© Ann Skea

All page references (THCP) are to Ted Hughes Collected Poems, Faber, 2003.

'Adam' and 'The Song' (THCP 443)

Adam and the Sacred Nine was first published by Ted and Olwyn Hughes's Rainbow Press in the Spring of 1979. This limited edition of 160 copies contained the full sequence of poems, five of which were dropped when the sequence was incorporated in Moortown (Faber 1979). The full Rainbow Press edition represents, I believe, Ted's first use of Cabbala as a framework for a sequence of poems, and the Cabbala he used was a version of that which was developed by the Hermetic Occult NeoPlatonists of the Italian Renaissance.

Renaissance Cabbala was largely based on the work of Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), who translated Hebrew Cabbala into Latin and adapted it to a contemporary Christian framework. Pico's Cabbala, however, was married to the Gnosticism, Alchemy, astrology and magic which he had learned from his mentor, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), whose own pioneering translations brought together philosophical texts by Plato, Pythagoras and the (reputedly) Egyptian, Hermes Trismagistus.

This so-called 'Christian Cabbala', with and without Alchemy and the other occult and mystical beliefs, strongly influenced the work of sixteenth century artists, writers and poets in Italy and England, and Ted discussed its influence on English Elizabethan poets in his 'Introduction' to Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being (Faber, 1992. pp.18-34). He had read the work of Pico and Ficino, and also that of the scholar, Frances Yates, whose Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition (University of Chicago Press, London, 1979) documents the development of Renaissance Hermetic NeoPlatonism and the changes it brought to religion and the arts. Ted noted the influence of Christian Cabbala on Sir Philip Sidney and his literary circle, on John Dee, Sir Francis Bacon, Chapman, Milton and others. Its structural patterns and numerology have been traced by scholars in the work of Dante, Spencer, Donne, Shakespeare and Milton¹, and they are especially apparent in the work of Blake and Yeats, both of whom strongly influenced Ted's own work.

In Adam and the Sacred Nine, the cosmos which Ted's Adam inhabits is a Hermetic NeoPlatonic cosmos: one in which the whole of creation resonates to the harmony of the Spheres of which it is composed. FluddIt is a cosmos in which the mercurial Female Principle (which for Cabbalists is Nature, the Female aspect of God, Sophia and, for

Jewish Cabbalists, the Shekinah) is divided from the Male aspect of God and is exiled in Matter. In this cosmos, humankind, made in the image of God, embodies a spark of Divine creative energy and is, therefore, given the task of fostering that energy in order to reunite the Female and Male aspects of the Godhead and, thus, re-create the natural balance which obtained at the first moment of Creation. Significantly, for a poet, the Divine Spark within us which must do this work is what Renaissance Cabbalist, Robert Fludd (1574-1637) called the 'Creative Imagination', and it is this which urges us towards knowledge and enlightenment. Significantly, too, this task requires the active pursuit of self-knowledge and the development of will and determination. It is a task which Ted's protagonists, until Adam, had constantly attempted and, as constantly, failed to achieve.

Writing to Keith Sagar in April 1980, shortly after *Adam and the Sacred Nine* had been published in the Faber trade edition of *Moortown*, Ted linked Adam to the protagonist of the 'Prometheus', 'Earth-Numb' and 'Moortown' sequences in that book. The "first part [Moortown]"; he wrote, "is a life embedded in mud, body of death etc. & seeds. Prometheus is what tries to wake up inside this. Earth Numb is his failing effort to come to terms with it. Adam is his succeeding means of coming to terms with it". He went on to say that "the whole drift is an alchemising of a phoenix out of a serpent. An awakening life out of an unawakened"².

Both phoenix and serpent are alchemical symbols, and Alchemy, like Cabbala, is a spiritual art. Summing up the whole group of poems in alchemical imagery, Ted described them as repeated efforts to bring about a "birth" in the "supernatural, spirit, inner world" of his protagonists. The mystical, healing intent of this is clear. What distinguishes *Adam and the Sacred Nine* as a specifically Cabbalistic sequence, however, is the very presence of Adam and of the nine "sacred" birds.

From 1979, when Ted first began to write bird poems influenced by the mystical Sufi fable *The Conference of the Birds*³, Alchemy had been an underlying theme and purpose in his work⁴. But Adam, with his Biblical origins deep in Jewish and Christian lore, introduced a more specifically Cabbalistic dimension into Ted's work. Adam, whose name comes from the Hebrew (meaning 'man'), is regarded by Cabbalists as representing "the great name of God in His creative unfolding"⁵. He is god's representative on earth and always, in Cabbala, he has a special status, and a special task to perform in this world. What distinguishes him from other animals is his ability to ask questions. He is known as the "question-asking creature"⁶.

As descendents of Adam, it is appropriate that we, too, should ask questions, and a number of questions arise in regard to Adam and the Sacred Nine. Who is Adam? Why are the birds sacred? What do the birds teach Adam? Why are there nine birds? And why must Adam be woken?

All but the last two of these questions have been partly answered by others (Scigaj, Sagar and Robinson, in particular)⁷ without recourse to Cabbala. Cabbala, however, offers very specific and very precise answers to all the questions in a way which is

wholly appropriate to the shamanic, healing purpose which is common to Ted's poetry.

Adam, of course, is more than just the Biblical progenitor of the human race. He is a symbol of all humankind, including you and me. He is also, as others have noted, Ted himself searching for self-knowledge, understanding and healing. Ted's purpose, too, was not just personal, but universal: the poems not only bring Adam to spiritual rebirth, they also subject the poet and the reader to a process which is intended to heal the division between us and nature. Adam, therefore, undertakes the shamanistic task of reintegration and regeneration in our world. Such, is the generally accepted view of Adam, but his task is also, as I intend to show, the Alchemical/Hermetic and, specifically, Cabbalistic task of reuniting the Female and Male aspects of God.

There is agreement, too, about the sacredness and the general purpose of the birds, and this is based on Ted's own statement, in various introductions to these poems, that the "nine divine birds" are sent down to Adam by "his creator", "to become his guardian exemplary spirits" and to "bring their gift of 'how to live'"⁸. All this is true. Cabbala, however, explains more than this.

Tree Pillars

The Cabbalistic Tree, in Ted's own words, is "a contrivance for imagining the ordered universe"⁹. Like myth, religion and science, it provides a framework within which to contemplate the mysteries of the world and our place in it. Specifically, Ted writes, Cabbala offers "a memory system", a "mnemonic visual image" which consists of a tree on which the branches form "a pattern of ten ascending stations (Sephira – Angelic Powers) positioned on and between the pillars of Justice and Mercy, mounting from the lowest Hells to the Divine Source. The ten stations encompass all the possibilities of existence". The first step in any mystical journey is to find and to foster the Divine spark within ourselves. And the Cabbalist begins this process by climbing, through meditation (or, in Ted's case, through poetic ritual), the Path of the Serpent, which begins at the lowest Sephira (Malkuth) on the Cabbalistic Tree and climbs, "step by step" through the ten Sephirothic stations "towards union with the Divine Source" at the Tree's apex.

Binah

Each of the ten Sephirothic stations has several mnemonic aids associated with it to help the Cabbalist to remember and understand its energies. Each has a title, and a number which has spiritual meaning and significance. Each has a Virtue which represents its energies in perfect balance; a Vice which is caused by an excess or an insufficiency of those energies; and a Qlippoth, which represents the darkest, most degraded and impure state of those energies. For each, there is an associated Hebrew God name; and for each there is an Angel or Archangel with particular duties. Each is associated, too, with a specific Mystical Experience which the Cabbalist may expect at that particular stage in his or her journey. Each, too, exists within a particular Planetary Sphere and has its own Magic Image for contemplation. Sometimes one or more of these meditation aids are clearly present in Ted's poems: more often, they provide the visual and imaginative stimuli from which he draws when dealing with each Sephirothic station in the poems of Adam and the Scared Nine.

As is appropriate, Ted's poetic, Cabbalistic journey in *Adam and the Sacred Nine* begins at Malkuth, Sephiroth number 10 at the base of the Cabbalistic Tree. This is our Earth, our physical world, and it is furthest from the pure, creative, spiritual energies of the Divine Source. Into this world Ted introduces 'The Song' (THCP 443), a poem which, in his introduction, he quite specifically calls "an invocation".

The song of Ted's poem is pure energy. It is a part of the harmonic music which Plato, following Pythagoras, described as being caused by the vibration and motion of the Celestial Spheres. It is the "Nature-Music" which, as the Renaissance musicologist Athanasius Kircher wrote in 1662, "contains within itself the nature of all things" and is "the great cosmo-music / the wonderful harmony of heaven / of the elements and of all creatures"¹⁰. Like the mythical magical and fertile wind associated with Orpheus and Pan, this song exists simply as vibrations. It stirs the air, the water, the leaves, the stones: it echoes from the "hill-slope", but it is "careless" of the physical elements of the world it is in and of the mouth, throat, "lungs and veins" from which it pours. It is "The song made of joy"; and in many respects it is like the "lark-song hidden in the wind" which is heard in the "cradle-grave" of Elmet, "where the mothers gallop their souls"¹¹: it exists in Adam's world, the physical world created from the four alchemical 'Mothers' – Fire, Air, Earth, Water. This is the Sphere of Malkuth, which is known as 'The Gate of Life' and 'The Gate of Death', and the song pours out over the "empty grave" of what has not yet been born.

The song is a song of "happiness, secret and wild", but "like a lament" it searches for something which does not yet exist: something which, in Cabbalistic terms, must be found in Adam, for this is the lament of Nature separated from the Divine Source, and she searches for the Divine Spark in Adam through which they may work together towards reunion and wholeness.

Adam, however, lies at Malkuth, prone on the earth from which he was made and to which he must return. Above him, the Sephirothic Tree stretches upwards to infinity and the immaterial light of the Divine Source, but here on Earth that light is fragmented, dispersed and mixed with darkness. Adam exists in a world of division, disorder, and spiritual darkness, and he lies "defeated". He has, as Ted says in his introductions, "fallen as usual", which is a curious phrase, since the Biblical Adam fell only once.

At Malkuth, however, all the disparate energies of the Tree are gathered and this includes all history, all mythology and all religions – everything known and everything that we know, think and dream – everything which makes up the world as we know it. Time and again, Mankind has raised itself out of the mud and sought enlightenment. Time and again, we have fallen back into indifference, disaster and war. Individually, too, we struggle to understand the world and our place in it; struggle to balance the rational and the non-rational sides of our nature; struggle with the extremes of love and hate, needs and desires, worldly and spiritual problems. We look for the spark of light which, in NeoPlatonic terms is often depicted as striving "for divine knowledge out of the darkness of the world" and is reflected in the individual soul's "struggle for salvation"¹².

Again and again we give up the struggle and, like Adam, lie defeated, exhausted, “low as water”.

Jacobs Ladder

So, Ted’s Adam has “fallen as usual”. He dreams “the tower of light”, which might well be the Sephirothic Tree which towers above him like Jacob’s ladder or the Platonic pillar of light which extends from heaven to earth¹³; but it could equally be a symbol of security and strength, guidance and hope. Adam, like many powerless humans, dreams of “echelons” (military divisions) of steel and of warfare. He is “rigged” (which has the nautical meaning of ‘equipped with sails’ but can also mean simply ‘clothed’) like a ship of hope but only with frail “twigs”, so, he dreams of the powerful progress of “bulldozers and cranes”, machines with which he may build walls to protect himself. In his fragile, easily bruised state, he dreams of indestructible immortality, a “diamond body” like that of Taoist religion, perfect and incorruptible.

Adam’s dreams defy his natural, naked state but they also re-iterate human history where, too often, our dreams and our creative energies have gone beyond the natural need for security, self-defence and physical and spiritual nourishment and have tipped over into rigid, over-ambitious and destructive desires. Most importantly, from the Cabbalistic point of view, our spiritual dreams of wholeness, harmony and of achieving the ‘diamond’ state of illumination and incorruptibility too often become mired in dogma, rules, religious bigotry and ambition, and we, like Adam, fall “as usual”.

The Illusion of Malkuth is Materialism. It is the illusion of ownership of worldly things. Adam’s dreams are of the possible and the impossible but they are all worldly, even “the religion of the diamond body”; and all are earth-bound. The divine spark within him, that “spirit awareness” which Ted likened in his letter to Sagar to the intuition of “something very brilliant and strange”, which he sees only as if he were trying “to see through blindfoldedness or nearly sealed eyes”, is “humbled to the physical body-cell confinement”¹⁴. So, he lies helpless, defeated, vulnerable and tormented by what he cannot achieve and what he cannot have. His “morse” (his signals to others) has ceased, he is mentally, physically and emotionally as low as it is possible for a human being to be. He exhibits the same “anaesthetised alienation” as that of Ted’s protagonist at the beginning of *Cave Birds* and exists as the “most debased raw material of de-spiritualised entropy”¹⁵.

‘Awake!’ (THCP 444)

In some respects this is good. Adam, now, is one with the mud from which he was created. He has become the *prima materia* from which any Alchemical and Cabbalistic purification must begin, and the sharpness of the animals and plants which come to him in the next poem, ‘Awake’ (THCP 444), acts like Alchemical Sulphur, biting and breaking down impurities. He has reached the same state as that exhibited by the Knight, in *Cave Birds*, but unlike the Knight he is not victorious in his defeat: there is no suggestion that Adam has conquered his physical body or that he will offer his bones to Nature as a sacrifice. He simply lies there, immobile, without the will to stir, sinking

deeper into the state of 'Stasis' which is the Qlippoth of Malkuth - the most negative, degraded state, which is as close to the darkness and oblivion of death as it is possible to be. And it is not Alchemy which will effect his rescue in this sequence, but Cabbala.

In the full, Rainbow Press, sequence of Adam and the Sacred Nine, 'Awake!' describes the attempts of Nature (animals and plants) to make Adam move. "Get up", they cry, seven times. Seven was an important number for Renaissance Cabbalists. It is the formative and creative number of Nature, which is the 'Soul of the World'; the number which raises humankind from the mundane to the spiritual level. "Get up!", "Awake!", "Arise!", cry the "flint-faced bird", the "harpoon-shaped fish", the weasel, the thorn leaf, the thistle and the ant. All are sharp, biting, piercing, prickly things. They demand, plead, cajole and shame Adam. They remind him of his responsibility for them, a responsibility which, as the Bible tells and Cabbalists believe, was given him by God at the Creation (Genesis: 1:28-30) and which he undertook in the act of naming the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). "We depend on you", they tell him, "don't discourage the hosts, they are all watching".

Ted was never casual in his choice of words in his poems, so the word 'hosts' was carefully chosen. Who or what are these watchful hosts?

They may well be the hosts of plants and animals who wait for Adam to be woken; but there is also a suggestion in that word that Adam is a guest or a lodger in this world and, so, is under some obligation to whoever is providing for his needs. 'Hosts' also has a religious meaning. It refers to the consecrated elements which lie at the heart of religious rituals and which bind human and God together. These sacramental 'hosts' await Adam if and when he is ready to stir himself and approach God; and the Divine Spark within him needs this spiritual nourishment in order to survive. For Cabbalists, too, this Divine Spark is essential for the healing task which Adam must undertake and, for them, 'hosts' refers to the Hosts of Heaven and, specifically, to the Hebrew 'Irin' (meaning 'those who watch and wait') – including Archangels like Michael and Gabriel who have the special role of watching over Creation and acting as intermediaries between human beings and God¹⁶.

Whatever the hosts are, Adam ignores them: just as he ignores the urgings of the plants and animals.

'All this time his cry' (THCP 444), 'He had retreated' (THCP 444-5)

The next two poems in the Rainbow Press edition, tell of Adam's abject misery but also of the persistence of the Divine Spirit within him. In the first poem, this spirit is no more than "his cry". Like the song which is Ted's invocation, it is a vibration in the air, "a breeze", a magical "starry wind" which stirs the "dry grass" lamenting his "lost gamble". Paradoxically, it is "his cry" and yet it has "nothing at all to do with him". It is "just passing"; just "random atoms", helpless to control him as he is helpless to control it.

Ted's imagery of wind and stars and sun, identifies the cry with the world of Nature.

Adam is the human agent whose task it is to aid Nature's struggle for reunion with the Divine Source, but he refuses to co-operate: so, this cry is a lament. The loss, however, is both Adam's and Nature's. Without his own efforts, Adam will never achieve spiritual enlightenment: he will never reach the sun, which is not only the source of life but is also the traditional symbol in all mystical teachings for the Divine Source. The cry, therefore, is Adam's and Nature's "sun-grief" for the spiritual and ecological death and sterility which his inaction and his lack of care will inevitably bring: our globe, our Earth, the Sephirothic Sphere of Malkuth, will become a barren "stone" – a memorial to Adam's failure.

But Adam is not yet dead. He has "retreated" to "the last redoubt of bone", like a shaman who must die to our world, contemplate his own skeleton and be reborn from bone-seed before he can fly through the gateway to the Other World on his mythic healing journey. All ambition, all physical and worldly trappings have gone: only bone, "his skeleton", "the final trophy", "one of the elementals – eternal" is left in "its hanger of emptiness". Nevertheless, within Adam, lodged in his bones, immortal, "beyond birth-pang and maggot", there remains a vibration - "a voice". The "Southern Cross", the "bright sky-crack of listening", the "bone-star" of Ted's imagery, all identify this voice as a guiding light in the darkness and emptiness which now surrounds him. Here at Malkuth, in Cabbalistic terms, that voice can only be the spark of Divine energy within Adam which links him with Nature: and, appropriately consistent with Ted's star imagery, Nature herself is personified in Cabbala as the star-goddess, Venus.

Now, "at last", as Ted tells us in his BBC introduction to the poems, Adam's "creator can't stand it any longer. And so he sends down nine divine birds to become his guardian exemplary spirits". They come, as the Introduction in the Rainbow Press edition says, "to tell him how to live".

Who is this "creator"? He is clearly not the perfect Divine Source of the Christian Hermetic NeoPlatonists, nor is he the unmanifest, transcendent AYIN of Jewish Cabbala. He is too human in his impatience, too ready to intervene with things in our world by sending the nine birds to awaken Adam to be either of these.

Ted's Creator is clearly a human invention, very like his God in the Crow poems and his Tales of the Early World. Yet, Cabbala, too is a human invention. In its highest form, Cabbala is an idea - an infinitely flexible pattern which allows for a lifetime of meditation on the "something very brilliant and strange" of which Ted spoke in his letter to Sagar¹⁷, something which seems to lie beyond our understanding. In our struggle to understand, however, we invent stories, myths and fables: we regard intuitions with suspicion and we take ideas and try to pin them down in rational and logical forms. So, our notions of that "something very brilliant and strange" becomes progressively more fixed and rigid.

The earliest Cabbalists recognized this danger and, paradoxically, built it into their pattern of the Cabbalistic Tree. They imagined the Tree as linking four intersecting Worlds, each of which contains ten Sephirothic 'stations'. OverlapThe topmost World, nearest the Divine Source, is the World of Atziluth – the World of Emanation, within

which the Sephiroth are pure, formless, expressions of God's energies, inaccessible to normal consciousness. Below, but connected to the Atziluthic World, is the World of Briah – the World of Creation, where abstract patterns flow and everything is present in potential. Here, the energies begin to separate and diffuse, but nothing is yet determined or fixed. Below this again, is the World of Yetzirah – the World of Formation. Energies here begin to be shaped into complex but abstract patterns. These are the patterns of thought which in the fourth, lowest World of Assiah – the World of Making, become material and fixed. We, Adam, all creatures, all plants, all things manifest, real and tangible, exist at Malkuth, the lowest Sephira in the lowest World of Assiah, and Ted's Creator, too, exists here. He is, however, like everything else in this lowest World, a reflection of the purer light and energy of the Worlds above us. But he is also directly linked on the central Pillar of the extended Cabbalistic Tree to all of those upper Worlds and to the Divine Source.

Ted, in Adam and the Sacred Nine, did not use the extended Tree, only the ten Sephiroth of the World of Assiah¹⁸. He also worked consciously in Malkuth, knowing full well that all the energies of all the Worlds and all the necessary elements of creation, are gathered here; and that it requires only a Cabbalist's creative imagination, knowledge, trained will and determination to effect change in the existing patterns. Here, in our World at Malkuth, is where every spiritual journey must begin.

Adam's Creator, like all the Creators we have invented in myth, religion and story, reflects our limited human understanding of Creation. He is a mere shadow of something we are unable to describe or understand, but, still, he embodies supernatural powers. These he uses to send down to Adam nine "divine" messengers who enter this Worlds of Assiah as "just ordinary birds".

Jacob

The divine messengers of Cabbala are the Angels (the word means 'messenger'), and Ted described the Sephiroth as "Angelic Powers". These immaterial, supernatural emanations are the link between God and humankind and each of the ten Sephiroth is governed by a particular Angelic host. Above Adam, who lies prone on the Earth at Malkuth, rise nine Sephiroth whose stations (to use Ted's term) he must visit in order to reach the Divine Source. At each Sephirothic station he has something new to learn about how to live as a fully conscious, spiritually aware and active agent of the Divine Spark within him. But in order to begin this work he must first be woken from the physical and spiritual stasis in which he lies. So, the Sephirothic Angels – the "guardian exemplary spirits" as Ted called them – take on the form of ordinary domestic birds; birds with which Adam (and we) are familiar in our ordinary, domestic environment; birds which share our everyday lives with us and which, in Malkuth, come to us with all the accumulated stories, myths, folk-lore and legends of human invention, as well as whatever knowledge we have acquired of them directly or indirectly.

"The first bird to arrive over the prone and apparently unconscious Adam", Ted tells us, "is the falcon".

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Literary scholar, Alastair Fowler, in particular, has published widely on the use of Cabbala in the structural patterns of Elizabethan poetry.
2. Ted Hughes to Keith Sagar, 23 April 1980. Reid (Ed.) Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2000. pp. 431-2.
3. The Conference of the Birds is a fable of the journey to self-knowledge. It was composed in the twelfth century by Farud Ud-Din Attar and is a classic of Sufi literature.
4. I explore the alchemical framework and purpose of Cave Birds, Remains of Elmet and River in detail in my book Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest, UNE Press, Australia, 1994.
5. The distinguished Jewish Scholar, Gershom Scholem, explains that 'Yod he vav he' (the four letters of the name of God) have, in Hebrew gematria, the numerical value 45, as does the word 'Adam'. Scholem, On Kabbalah and its Symbolism, Schocken Books, N.Y. 1965. p.104.
6. Lancaster, B. The Essence of Kabbalah, Eagle Editions, Royston, Herts. U.K., 2005. p.131.
7. Scigaj, L. The Poetry of Ted Hughes, University of Iowa Press, 1986, pp.279-286. Sagar, K. The Laughter of Foxes, Liverpool University Press, 2000. pp.136-7. Robinson, C. Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being, MacMillan, 1989, pp.181-195. Scigaj does recognize the Cabbalistic symbolism of Baskin's snake on the cover of Faber's edition of Moortown and he links this with Adam but he does not follow this up in detail in his discussion of the poems, choosing, rather, to emphasize Blakean parallels.
8. Note in The Rainbow Press edition of Adam and the Sacred Nine, and Ted's introduction to the BBC Radio 3 reading of some of the poems, given on 17 May 1980.
9. Hughes, T. Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, Faber, 1992. pp.20-21.
10. Kircher, Musurgia Universalis, 1662, quoted by Roob, A. Alchemy and Mysticism, Taschen, Koln, 1997. p.89.
11. 'Where the Mothers' (ROE 10) (THCP 455)
12. Roob. op.cit. p.22.
13. Plato describes this in detail in his fable of El in The Republic, Book X. Stephanus (1578), pp.616-7.

14. Op.cit. Hughes to Sagar, 23 April 1980.

15. Ted's description of his unenlightened protagonist in a letter to me: 3 Nov. 1984. Published in Reid, C. Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. pp 491-3.

16. Cabbalist and teacher, Warren Kenton (Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi), describes the Irin as a "Holy inner council", "the Messengers" and "the watchers who never sleep", and he allocates them to specific positions on the Cabbalistic Tree. A Kabbalistic Universe, Weiser Books, Boston, 1977, pp.59-60.

17. Op.Cit. Hughes to Sagar, 23 April 1980.

18. Later, when Ted was at the height of his creative powers, had a great depth of mystical and spiritual knowledge and had spent a lifetime training and developing his magical Will, he made full use of the four Worlds of the extended Tree, and all the subtle varied powers they present, to undertake the Cabbalistic journeys which are the foundation of Capriccio, Howls & Whispers and Birthday Letters.

Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama, text and illustrations © Ann Skea 2010. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Go To Next Chapter](#)

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional WrenWild Duck

Adam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama.

Part 1: 'Adam' 'The Song' 'Awake' 'All this time his cry' 'He had retreated'

© Ann Skea

All page references (THCP) are to Ted Hughes Collected Poems, Faber, 2003.

'Adam' and 'The Song'(THCP 443)

Adam and the Sacred Nine was first published by Ted and Olwyn Hughes's Rainbow Press in the Spring of 1979. This limited edition of 160 copies contained the full sequence of poems, five of which were dropped when the sequence was incorporated in Moortown (Faber 1979). The full Rainbow Press edition represents, I believe, Ted's first use of Cabbala as a framework for a sequence of poems, and the Cabbala he used was a version of that which was developed by the Hermetic Occult NeoPlatonists of the Italian Renaissance.

Renaissance Cabbala was largely based on the work of Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), who translated Hebrew Cabbala into Latin and adapted it to a contemporary Christian framework. Pico's Cabbala, however, was married to the Gnosticism, Alchemy, astrology and magic which he had learned from his mentor,

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), whose own pioneering translations brought together philosophical texts by Plato, Pythagoras and the (reputedly) Egyptian, Hermes Trismagistus.

This so-called 'Christian Cabbala', with and without Alchemy and the other occult and mystical beliefs, strongly influenced the work of sixteenth century artists, writers and poets in Italy and England, and Ted discussed its influence on English Elizabethan poets in his 'Introduction' to Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being (Faber, 1992. pp.18-34). He had read the work of Pico and Ficino, and also that of the scholar, Frances Yates, whose *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, London, 1979) documents the development of Renaissance Hermetic NeoPlatonism and the changes it brought to religion and the arts. Ted noted the influence of Christian Cabbala on Sir Philip Sidney and his literary circle, on John Dee, Sir Francis Bacon, Chapman, Milton and others. Its structural patterns and numerology have been traced by scholars in the work of Dante, Spencer, Donne, Shakespeare and Milton¹, and they are especially apparent in the work of Blake and Yeats, both of whom strongly influenced Ted's own work.

In *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, the cosmos which Ted's Adam inhabits is a Hermetic NeoPlatonic cosmos: one in which the whole of creation resonates to the harmony of the Spheres of which it is composed. FluddIt is a cosmos in which the mercurial Female Principle (which for Cabbalists is Nature, the Female aspect of God, Sophia and, for Jewish Cabbalists, the Shekinah) is divided from the Male aspect of God and is exiled in Matter. In this cosmos, humankind, made in the image of God, embodies a spark of Divine creative energy and is, therefore, given the task of fostering that energy in order to reunite the Female and Male aspects of the Godhead and, thus, re-create the natural balance which obtained at the first moment of Creation. Significantly, for a poet, the Divine Spark within us which must do this work is what Renaissance Cabbalist, Robert Fludd (1574-1637) called the 'Creative Imagination', and it is this which urges us towards knowledge and enlightenment. Significantly, too, this task requires the active pursuit of self-knowledge and the development of will and determination. It is a task which Ted's protagonists, until Adam, had constantly attempted and, as constantly, failed to achieve.

Writing to Keith Sagar in April 1980, shortly after *Adam and the Sacred Nine* had been published in the Faber trade edition of *Moortown*, Ted linked Adam to the protagonist of the 'Prometheus', 'Earth-Numb' and 'Moortown' sequences in that book. The "first part [Moortown]&rduo;, he wrote, "is a life embedded in mud, body of death etc. & seeds. Prometheus is what tries to wake up inside this. Earth Numb is his failing effort to come to terms with it. Adam is his succeeding means of coming to terms with it". He went on to say that "the whole drift is an alchemising of a phoenix out of a serpent. An awakening life out of an unawakened"².

Both phoenix and serpent are alchemical symbols, and Alchemy, like Cabbala, is a spiritual art. Summing up the whole group of poems in alchemical imagery, Ted described them as repeated efforts to bring about a "birth" in the "supernatural, spirit,

inner world” of his protagonists. The mystical, healing intent of this is clear. What distinguishes Adam and the Sacred Nine as a specifically Cabbalistic sequence, however, is the very presence of Adam and of the nine “sacred” birds.

From 1979, when Ted first began to write bird poems influenced by the mystical Sufi fable *The Conference of the Birds*³, Alchemy had been an underlying theme and purpose in his work⁴. But Adam, with his Biblical origins deep in Jewish and Christian lore, introduced a more specifically Cabbalistic dimension into Ted’s work. Adam, whose name comes from the Hebrew (meaning ‘man’), is regarded by Cabbalists as representing “the great name of God in His creative unfolding”⁵. He is god’s representative on earth and always, in Cabbala, he has a special status, and a special task to perform in this world. What distinguishes him from other animals is his ability to ask questions. He is known as the “question-asking creature”⁶.

As descendents of Adam, it is appropriate that we, too, should ask questions, and a number of questions arise in regard to Adam and the Sacred Nine. Who is Adam? Why are the birds sacred? What do the birds teach Adam? Why are there nine birds? And why must Adam be woken?

All but the last two of these questions have been partly answered by others (Scigaj, Sagar and Robinson, in particular)⁷ without recourse to Cabbala. Cabbala, however, offers very specific and very precise answers to all the questions in a way which is wholly appropriate to the shamanic, healing purpose which is common to Ted’s poetry.

Adam, of course, is more than just the Biblical progenitor of the human race. He is a symbol of all humankind, including you and me. He is also, as others have noted, Ted himself searching for self-knowledge, understanding and healing. Ted’s purpose, too, was not just personal, but universal: the poems not only bring Adam to spiritual rebirth, they also subject the poet and the reader to a process which is intended to heal the division between us and nature. Adam, therefore, undertakes the shamanistic task of reintegration and regeneration in our world. Such, is the generally accepted view of Adam, but his task is also, as I intend to show, the Alchemical/Hermetic and, specifically, Cabbalistic task of reuniting the Female and Male aspects of God.

There is agreement, too, about the sacredness and the general purpose of the birds, and this is based on Ted’s own statement, in various introductions to these poems, that the “nine divine birds” are sent down to Adam by “his creator”, “to become his guardian exemplary spirits” and to “bring their gift of ‘how to live’”⁸. All this is true. Cabbala, however, explains more than this.

Tree Pillars

The Cabbalistic Tree, in Ted’s own words, is “a contrivance for imagining the ordered universe”⁹. Like myth, religion and science, it provides a framework within which to contemplate the mysteries of the world and our place in it. Specifically, Ted writes, Cabbala offers “a memory system”, a “mnemonic visual image” which consists of a tree on which the branches form “a pattern of ten ascending stations (Sephiroth – Angelic

Powers) positioned on and between the pillars of Justice and Mercy, mounting from the lowest Hells to the Divine Source. The ten stations encompass all the possibilities of existence". The first step in any mystical journey is to find and to foster the Divine spark within ourselves. And the Cabbalist begins this process by climbing, through meditation (or, in Ted's case, through poetic ritual), the Path of the Serpent, which begins at the lowest Sephira (Malkuth) on the Cabbalistic Tree and climbs, "step by step" through the ten Sephirothic stations "towards union with the Divine Source" at the Tree's apex.

Binah

Each of the ten Sephirothic stations has several mnemonic aids associated with it to help the Cabbalist to remember and understand its energies. Each has a title, and a number which has spiritual meaning and significance. Each has a Virtue which represents its energies in perfect balance; a Vice which is caused by an excess or an insufficiency of those energies; and a Qlippoth, which represents the darkest, most degraded and impure state of those energies. For each, there is an associated Hebrew God name; and for each there is an Angel or Archangel with particular duties. Each is associated, too, with a specific Mystical Experience which the Cabbalist may expect at that particular stage in his or her journey. Each, too, exists within a particular Planetary Sphere and has its own Magic Image for contemplation. Sometimes one or more of these meditation aids are clearly present in Ted's poems: more often, they provide the visual and imaginative stimuli from which he draws when dealing with each Sephirothic station in the poems of Adam and the Sacred Nine.

As is appropriate, Ted's poetic, Cabbalistic journey in Adam and the Sacred Nine begins at Malkuth, Sephiroth number 10 at the base of the Cabbalistic Tree. This is our Earth, our physical world, and it is furthest from the pure, creative, spiritual energies of the Divine Source. Into this world Ted introduces 'The Song' (THCP 443), a poem which, in his introduction, he quite specifically calls "an invocation".

The song of Ted's poem is pure energy. It is a part of the harmonic music which Plato, following Pythagoras, described as being caused by the vibration and motion of the Celestial Spheres. It is the "Nature-Music" which, as the Renaissance musicologist Athanasius Kircher wrote in 1662, "contains within itself the nature of all things" and is "the great cosmo-music / the wonderful harmony of heaven / of the elements and of all creatures"¹⁰. Like the mythical magical and fertile wind associated with Orpheus and Pan, this song exists simply as vibrations. It stirs the air, the water, the leaves, the stones: it echoes from the "hill-slope", but it is "careless" of the physical elements of the world it is in and of the mouth, throat, "lungs and veins" from which it pours. It is "The song made of joy"; and in many respects it is like the "lark-song hidden in the wind" which is heard in the "cradle-grave" of Elmet, "where the mothers gallop their souls"¹¹: it exists in Adam's world, the physical world created from the four alchemical 'Mothers' – Fire, Air, Earth, Water. This is the Sphere of Malkuth, which is known as 'The Gate of Life' and 'The Gate of Death', and the song pours out over the "empty grave" of what has not yet been born.

The song is a song of "happiness, secret and wild", but "like a lament" it searches for

something which does not yet exist: something which, in Cabbalistic terms, must be found in Adam, for this is the lament of Nature separated from the Divine Source, and she searches for the Divine Spark in Adam through which they may work together towards reunion and wholeness.

Adam, however, lies at Malkuth, prone on the earth from which he was made and to which he must return. Above him, the Sephirothic Tree stretches upwards to infinity and the immaterial light of the Divine Source, but here on Earth that light is fragmented, dispersed and mixed with darkness. Adam exists in a world of division, disorder, and spiritual darkness, and he lies “defeated”. He has, as Ted says in his introductions, “fallen as usual”, which is a curious phrase, since the Biblical Adam fell only once.

At Malkuth, however, all the disparate energies of the Tree are gathered and this includes all history, all mythology and all religions – everything known and everything that we know, think and dream – everything which makes up the world as we know it. Time and again, Mankind has raised itself out of the mud and sought enlightenment. Time and again, we have fallen back into indifference, disaster and war. Individually, too, we struggle to understand the world and our place in it; struggle to balance the rational and the non-rational sides of our nature; struggle with the extremes of love and hate, needs and desires, worldly and spiritual problems. We look for the spark of light which, in NeoPlatonic terms is often depicted as striving “for divine knowledge out of the darkness of the world” and is reflected in the individual soul’s “struggle for salvation”¹². Again and again we give up the struggle and, like Adam, lie defeated, exhausted, “low as water”.

Jacobs Ladder

So, Ted’s Adam has “fallen as usual”. He dreams “the tower of light”, which might well be the Sephirothic Tree which towers above him like Jacob’s ladder or the Platonic pillar of light which extends from heaven to earth¹³; but it could equally be a symbol of security and strength, guidance and hope. Adam, like many powerless humans, dreams of “echelons” (military divisions) of steel and of warfare. He is “rigged” (which has the nautical meaning of ‘equipped with sails’ but can also mean simply ‘clothed’) like a ship of hope but only with frail “twigs”, so, he dreams of the powerful progress of “bulldozers and cranes”, machines with which he may build walls to protect himself. In his fragile, easily bruised state, he dreams of indestructible immortality, a “diamond body” like that of Taoist religion, perfect and incorruptible.

Adam’s dreams defy his natural, naked state but they also re-iterate human history where, too often, our dreams and our creative energies have gone beyond the natural need for security, self-defence and physical and spiritual nourishment and have tipped over into rigid, over-ambitious and destructive desires. Most importantly, from the Cabbalistic point of view, our spiritual dreams of wholeness, harmony and of achieving the ‘diamond’ state of illumination and incorruptibility too often become mired in dogma, rules, religious bigotry and ambition, and we, like Adam, fall “as usual”.

The Illusion of Malkuth is Materialism. It is the illusion of ownership of worldly things.

Adam's dreams are of the possible and the impossible but they are all worldly, even "the religion of the diamond body"; and all are earth-bound. The divine spark within him, that "spirit awareness" which Ted likened in his letter to Sagar to the intuition of "something very brilliant and strange", which he sees only as if he were trying "to see through blindfoldedness or nearly sealed eyes", is "humbled to the physical body-cell confinement"¹⁴. So, he lies helpless, defeated, vulnerable and tormented by what he cannot achieve and what he cannot have. His "morse" (his signals to others) has ceased, he is mentally, physically and emotionally as low as it is possible for a human being to be. He exhibits the same "anaesthetised alienation" as that of Ted's protagonist at the beginning of *Cave Birds* and exists as the "most debased raw material of de-spiritualised entropy"¹⁵.

'Awake!'(THCP 444)

In some respects this is good. Adam, now, is one with the mud from which he was created. He has become the *prima materia* from which any Alchemical and Cabbalistic purification must begin, and the sharpness of the animals and plants which come to him in the next poem, 'Awake' (THCP 444), acts like Alchemical Sulphur, biting and breaking down impurities. He has reached the same state as that exhibited by the Knight, in *Cave Birds*, but unlike the Knight he is not victorious in his defeat: there is no suggestion that Adam has conquered his physical body or that he will offer his bones to Nature as a sacrifice. He simply lies there, immobile, without the will to stir, sinking deeper into the state of 'Stasis' which is the *Qlippoth* of *Malkuth* - the most negative, degraded state, which is as close to the darkness and oblivion of death as it is possible to be. And it is not Alchemy which will effect his rescue in this sequence, but Cabbala.

In the full, Rainbow Press, sequence of Adam and the Sacred Nine, 'Awake!' describes the attempts of Nature (animals and plants) to make Adam move. "Get up", they cry, seven times. Seven was an important number for Renaissance Cabbalists. It is the formative and creative number of Nature, which is the 'Soul of the World'; the number which raises humankind from the mundane to the spiritual level. "Get up!", "Awake!", "Arise!", cry the "flint-faced bird", the "harpoon-shaped fish", the weasel, the thorn leaf, the thistle and the ant. All are sharp, biting, piercing, prickly things. They demand, plead, cajole and shame Adam. They remind him of his responsibility for them, a responsibility which, as the Bible tells and Cabbalists believe, was given him by God at the Creation (Genesis: 1:28-30) and which he undertook in the act of naming the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). "We depend on you", they tell him, "don't discourage the hosts, they are all watching".

Ted was never casual in his choice of words in his poems, so the word 'hosts' was carefully chosen. Who or what are these watchful hosts?

They may well be the hosts of plants and animals who wait for Adam to be woken; but there is also a suggestion in that word that Adam is a guest or a lodger in this world and, so, is under some obligation to whoever is providing for his needs. 'Hosts' also has a religious meaning. It refers to the consecrated elements which lie at the heart of

religious rituals and which bind human and God together. These sacramental 'hosts' await Adam if and when he is ready to stir himself and approach God; and the Divine Spark within him needs this spiritual nourishment in order to survive. For Cabbalists, too, this Divine Spark is essential for the healing task which Adam must undertake and, for them, 'hosts' refers to the Hosts of Heaven and, specifically, to the Hebrew 'Irin' (meaning 'those who watch and wait') – including Archangels like Michael and Gabriel who have the special role of watching over Creation and acting as intermediaries between human beings and God¹⁶.

Whatever the hosts are, Adam ignores them: just as he ignores the urgings of the plants and animals.

'All this time his cry' (THCP 444), 'He had retreated' (THCP 444-5)

The next two poems in the Rainbow Press edition, tell of Adam's abject misery but also of the persistence of the Divine Spirit within him. In the first poem, this spirit is no more than "his cry". Like the song which is Ted's invocation, it is a vibration in the air, "a breeze", a magical "starry wind" which stirs the "dry grass" lamenting his "lost gamble". Paradoxically, it is "his cry" and yet it has "nothing at all to do with him". It is "just passing"; just "random atoms", helpless to control him as he is helpless to control it.

Ted's imagery of wind and stars and sun, identifies the cry with the world of Nature. Adam is the human agent whose task it is to aid Nature's struggle for reunion with the Divine Source, but he refuses to co-operate: so, this cry is a lament. The loss, however, is both Adam's and Nature's. Without his own efforts, Adam will never achieve spiritual enlightenment: he will never reach the sun, which is not only the source of life but is also the traditional symbol in all mystical teachings for the Divine Source. The cry, therefore, is Adam's and Nature's "sun-grief" for the spiritual and ecological death and sterility which his inaction and his lack of care will inevitably bring: our globe, our Earth, the Sephirothic Sphere of Malkuth, will become a barren "stone" – a memorial to Adam's failure.

But Adam is not yet dead. He has "retreated" to "the last redoubt of bone", like a shaman who must die to our world, contemplate his own skeleton and be reborn from bone-seed before he can fly through the gateway to the Other World on his mythic healing journey. All ambition, all physical and worldly trappings have gone: only bone, "his skeleton", "the final trophy", "one of the elementals – eternal" is left in "its hanger of emptiness". Nevertheless, within Adam, lodged in his bones, immortal, "beyond birth-pang and maggot", there remains a vibration - "a voice". The "Southern Cross", the "bright sky-crack of listening", the "bone-star" of Ted's imagery, all identify this voice as a guiding light in the darkness and emptiness which now surrounds him. Here at Malkuth, in Cabbalistic terms, that voice can only be the spark of Divine energy within Adam which links him with Nature: and, appropriately consistent with Ted's star imagery, Nature herself is personified in Cabbala as the star-goddess, Venus.

Now, "at last", as Ted tells us in his BBC introduction to the poems, Adam's "creator

can't stand it any longer. And so he sends down nine divine birds to become his guardian exemplary spirits". They come, as the Introduction in the Rainbow Press edition says, "to tell him how to live".

Who is this "creator"? He is clearly not the perfect Divine Source of the Christian Hermetic NeoPlatonists, nor is he the unmanifest, transcendent AYIN of Jewish Cabbala. He is too human in his impatience, too ready to intervene with things in our world by sending the nine birds to awaken Adam to be either of these.

Ted's Creator is clearly a human invention, very like his God in the Crow poems and his Tales of the Early World. Yet, Cabbala, too is a human invention. In its highest form, Cabbala is an idea - an infinitely flexible pattern which allows for a lifetime of meditation on the "something very brilliant and strange" of which Ted spoke in his letter to Sagar¹⁷, something which seems to lie beyond our understanding. In our struggle to understand, however, we invent stories, myths and fables: we regard intuitions with suspicion and we take ideas and try to pin them down in rational and logical forms. So, our notions of that "something very brilliant and strange" becomes progressively more fixed and rigid.

The earliest Cabbalists recognized this danger and, paradoxically, built it into their pattern of the Cabbalistic Tree. They imagined the Tree as linking four intersecting Worlds, each of which contains ten Sephirothic 'stations'. OverlapThe topmost World, nearest the Divine Source, is the World of Atziluth – the World of Emanation, within which the Sephiroth are pure, formless, expressions of God's energies, inaccessible to normal consciousness. Below, but connected to the Atziluthic World, is the World of Briah – the World of Creation, where abstract patterns flow and everything is present in potential. Here, the energies begin to separate and diffuse, but nothing is yet determined or fixed. Below this again, is the World of Yetzirah – the World of Formation. Energies here begin to be shaped into complex but abstract patterns. These are the patterns of thought which in the fourth, lowest World of Assiah – the World of Making, become material and fixed. We, Adam, all creatures, all plants, all things manifest, real and tangible, exist at Malkuth, the lowest Sephira in the lowest World of Assiah, and Ted's Creator, too, exists here. He is, however, like everything else in this lowest World, a reflection of the purer light and energy of the Worlds above us. But he is also directly linked on the central Pillar of the extended Cabbalistic Tree to all of those upper Worlds and to the Divine Source.

Ted, in Adam and the Sacred Nine, did not use the extended Tree, only the ten Sephiroth of the World of Assiah¹⁸. He also worked consciously in Malkuth, knowing full well that all the energies of all the Worlds and all the necessary elements of creation, are gathered here; and that it requires only a Cabbalist's creative imagination, knowledge, trained will and determination to effect change in the existing patterns. Here, in our World at Malkuth, is where every spiritual journey must begin.

Adam's Creator, like all the Creators we have invented in myth, religion and story, reflects our limited human understanding of Creation. He is a mere shadow of something we are unable to describe or understand, but, still, he embodies supernatural

powers. These he uses to send down to Adam nine “divine” messengers who enter this Worlds of Assiah as “just ordinary birds”.

Jacob

The divine messengers of Cabbala are the Angels (the word means ‘messenger’), and Ted described the Sephiroth as “Angelic Powers”. These immaterial, supernatural emanations are the link between God and humankind and each of the ten Sephiroth is governed by a particular Angelic host. Above Adam, who lies prone on the Earth at Malkuth, rise nine Sephiroth whose stations (to use Ted’s term) he must visit in order to reach the Divine Source. At each Sephirothic station he has something new to learn about how to live as a fully conscious, spiritually aware and active agent of the Divine Spark within him. But in order to begin this work he must first be woken from the physical and spiritual stasis in which he lies. So, the Sephirothic Angels – the “guardian exemplary spirits” as Ted called them – take on the form of ordinary domestic birds; birds with which Adam (and we) are familiar in our ordinary, domestic environment; birds which share our everyday lives with us and which, in Malkuth, come to us with all the accumulated stories, myths, folk-lore and legends of human invention, as well as whatever knowledge we have acquired of them directly or indirectly.

“The first bird to arrive over the prone and apparently unconscious Adam”, Ted tells us, “is the falcon”.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Literary scholar, Alastair Fowler, in particular, has published widely on the use of Cabbala in the structural patterns of Elizabethan poetry.
2. Ted Hughes to Keith Sagar, 23 April 1980. Reid (Ed.) Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2000. pp. 431-2.
3. The Conference of the Birds is a fable of the journey to self-knowledge. It was composed in the twelfth century by Farud Ud-Din Attar and is a classic of Sufi literature.
4. I explore the alchemical framework and purpose of Cave Birds, Remains of Elmet and River in detail in my book Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest, UNE Press, Australia, 1994.
5. The distinguished Jewish Scholar, Gershom Scholem, explains that ‘Yod he vav he’ (the four letters of the name of God) have, in Hebrew gematria, the numerical value 45, as does the word ‘Adam’. Scholem, On Kabbalah and its Symbolism, Schocken Books, N.Y. 1965. p.104.
6. Lancaster, B. The Essence of Kabbalah, Eagle Editions, Royston, Herts. U.K., 2005. p.131.
7. Scigaj, L. The Poetry of Ted Hughes, University of Iowa Press, 1986, pp.279-286.

Sagar, K. *The Laughter of Foxes*, Liverpool University Press, 2000. pp.136-7. Robinson, C. *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, MacMillan, 1989, pp.181-195. Scigaj does recognize the Cabbalistic symbolism of Baskin's snake on the cover of Faber's edition of *Moortown* and he links this with Adam but he does not follow this up in detail in his discussion of the poems, choosing, rather, to emphasize Blakean parallels.

8. Note in *The Rainbow Press* edition of *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, and Ted's introduction to the BBC Radio 3 reading of some of the poems, given on 17 May 1980.

9. Hughes, T. *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber, 1992. pp.20-21.

10. Kircher, *Musurgia Universalis*, 1662, quoted by Roob, A. *Alchemy and Mysticism*, Taschen, Koln, 1997. p.89.

11. 'Where the Mothers' (ROE 10) (THCP 455)

12. Roob. op.cit. p.22.

13. Plato describes this in detail in his fable of El in *The Republic*, Book X. Stephanus (1578), pp.616-7.

14. Op.cit. Hughes to Sagar, 23 April 1980.

15. Ted's description of his unenlightened protagonist in a letter to me: 3 Nov. 1984. Published in Reid, C. *Letters of Ted Hughes*, Faber, 2007. pp 491-3.

16. Cabbalist and teacher, Warren Kenton (Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi), describes the Irin as a "Holy inner council", "the Messengers" and "the watchers who never sleep", and he allocates them to specific positions on the Cabbalistic Tree. *A Kabbalistic Universe*, Weiser Books, Boston, 1977, pp.59-60.

17. Op.Cit. Hughes to Sagar, 23 April 1980.

18. Later, when Ted was at the height of his creative powers, had a great depth of mystical and spiritual knowledge and had spent a lifetime training and developing his magical Will, he made full use of the four Worlds of the extended Tree, and all the subtle varied powers they present, to undertake the Cabbalistic journeys which are the foundation of *Capriccio*, *Howls & Whispers* and *Birthday Letters*.

Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama, text and illustrations © Ann Skea 2010. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go To Next Chapter

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalAdam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama. Part 2.
'And the Falcon came', 'The Skylark came', 'The Wild Duck', 'The Swift comes the swift', 'The Unknown Wren'.

© Ann Skea

All page references (THCP) are to Ted Hughes Collected Poems, Faber, 2003.
'And the Falcon came' (THCP 445)

Falcon

Falcons are one of the smallest of the great eagles, and for centuries they have been captured and trained by humans for hunting purposes. They are powerful birds; swift and deadly hunters, which soar effortlessly high in the heavens and seem to drop from the sun onto their prey. Their golden eyes, like the "round angelic eye" of Ted's hawk in 'The Hawk in the Rain' (THCP 19), resemble the sun's orb, and in many countries they are still regarded as sacred birds and as offspring, like the Egyptian falcon-god, Horus, of the great Sun God. They are associated, too, with goddesses. Circe, in her falcon form, is related to Helios, the Sun; Freya hovers over the Earth in falcon garments; the Great Goddess, Frigg, is also a falcon. All – gods and goddesses – are able to move with ease between heaven and earth; all represent nobility, power and fertility.

In Cabbala, the first 'offspring' (so-to-speak) of the Divine Source is the emanation of pure white light which appears at Kether, the Sephira at the Crown of the Cabbalistic Tree in the topmost World of Atziluth. This is where, in Alchemical and Cabbalistic symbolism and imagery, the great eagle /sun-bird resides. In our material world of Assiah, however, where we receive only reflected light from the upper Worlds, it is appropriate that the first angelic messenger to appear to Adam should be the symbolic Falcon (the word is capitalized throughout the poem) but also just an ordinary bird. This Falcon is very like Ted's hawk in Hawk in the Rain, and it is remarkable that in the very first poem of Ted's first published book his protagonist drowns "in the drumming ploughland" whilst the hawk hangs "effortlessly at height" holding "all creation in a weightless quiet". Adam and the hawk were there in Ted's work from the start, but Ted's language and 'voice' in 'And the Falcon came' is simpler and more direct than it was in his earlier poem. His Falcon is mineral hard, his "gunmetal feathers", his "bullet-brow", his deadly talons and his "tooled bill" have one purpose only, and that is "the reconstruction of Falcon". It is entirely consistent with this Falcon's position at Kether, Sephira 1, which is titled 'Unity' and which, in Hebrew Cabbala, is given the God-name EHEIEH – (translated as 'I am' or 'I will be') – that this bird has but a single purpose from which he will "not falter".

Falcon

"The gods of Kether" says one Cabbalistic text, "are terrible gods which eat their children" And Kether is "pure being unlimited by form or matter"¹⁹. This applies perfectly to Ted's Falcon as a reflection of that Atziluthic pure being. He is ruthless and powerful, "dividing the mountain", "hurling the world away", bent on "collision" and

destruction. He grasps “complete” in his talons the “crux of rays” which, in Cabbala, symbolize the power of Kether to cross-link all polarities in order to create unity, and which also suggests the lightning flash of energy from the first emanation which zig-zags down the Tree from Sephira to Sephira, connecting heaven and earth.

And, since Kether is the Sephira from which all comes and to which all must return, this falcon holds in its talons “a first, last single blow”.

Ted’s poem, however, also describes a real bird and the normal, familiar hunting behaviour of this bird. So, throughout the poem, the Cabbalistic energies of this Angelic guide from the Worlds above the World of Assiah, are reflected in the real behaviour of a real bird. It “plucks out the ghost”, which is the life of its prey, and strips down this dead creature “to its component parts”. The “ghost” – that immaterial spark of life – is the spark of Divine Spirit which is to be reunited with the Divine Source; and the “hot flutter of earth” is not just a vivid image of fear, hot blood, and flying fur and feathers, it suggests, also, the fluttering presence of the hot, fecund, female Spirit of Nature.

This Falcon, in which all things are united, comes to Adam to demonstrate to him and teach him single-minded action, ruthless will, and determination to get to the heart of anything he tackles. It demonstrates, too, the ability to find the essence of earthly life and unite it with the pure “eye-flame” – the fiery, explosive energy – of the heavenly Source.

‘The Skylark came’ (THCP 445-6)

Skylark

The next birds to appear to Adam is the Skylark “who labours the whole day singing”²⁰. As the second bird and the second Angelic messenger, it is associated with Sephira 2, Chokmah (Wisdom, Creativity). At Chokmah, the first division of Kether’s pure energy takes place and, with duality, unity and stable equilibrium is lost.

Chokmah, in Cabbala, is known as ‘All Father’, the fertilizing Male Principle of the Cabbalistic Tree, but Chokmah is the place where male/female duality, like all other dualities, begins. It is here that the Female Principle of God becomes separated from the Male Principle, to eventually become exiled in matter, constantly seeking reunion. In the highest, Atziluthic World of Emanations, where the energies are still unbounded by form, unlimited, endlessly potent and dynamic, the Female Principle (Nature) is still pure vibration.

Artape

The reflection of this in the material World of Assiah is the Hermetic NeoPlatonic image of her as Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom and, in common Cabbalistic imagery, it is her ladder of knowledge and creativity which, as in Ted’s poem, is the “swinging ladder” which is “hooked to the sun” and connects heaven and earth. This is the Biblical Jacob’s ladder, which appeared as Jacob (like Adam) lay on the earth and dreamed. On this ladder Jacob saw “the angels of God ascending and descending” (Genesis 28:12-13),

just as Ted's divine birds visit Adam and leave. Sophia's ladder is also the golden chain by which, as the Hebrew Zohar says, "Everything is connected with everything, right through to the nethermost end of all the links"²¹ or, as Robert Fludd drew it in 1617, "leads from the hand of God via Virgin Nature" to the Earth, where "man imitates Nature and seeks to improve it"²². By means of this ladder or chain, we can climb, with Nature's help, out of the darkness of ignorance into the Divine light.

In Adam and the Sacred Nine, Nature's song and her constant labour for reunion with the male Principle, is reflected in the Skylark, which is her emissary. It, like the Archangel of Chokmah, Ratzel, is 'Herald of the Deity' and herald of the dawn of enlightenment. Early-rising country-folk are still said to 'get up with the lark', which is known as 'the bird of dawn'. Its crested head, too, associates it with other crested birds like the cockerel and the hoopoe, both of which are regarded in myth and folk-lore as divine messengers and heralds of a new day and a new beginning.

Skylarks sing constantly as they fly and their song is one of the most persistent and noticeable summer sounds of the English countryside, still clearly to be heard when the bird itself is no more than a tiny speck far up in the heavens. Their flight, too, is effortful and distinctive: their wings are constantly in motion and only stop (with their song) when they plummet back to earth and the grass in which they nest. The lift and fall of the Skylark's flight, and the heights to which it climbs, singing, as if "to thatch the sun" with bird-joy (a useless endeavour, to erect a frail and worldly roof over the immense and powerful cosmic energies of the sun), all this is beautifully captured in Ted's poem.

Skylark

The unpunctuated lines flow together like the continuous bird-song, and the repetitions – "with its song", "with its labour", "with its crest" and again, "with its song" – emphasise and enclose the bird's form and labour within that song, so that all are physically linked in the poem, just as all reflect its Divine origins and allegiances.

With its song – that fragment of the Divine creative energies – the bird labours to keep off the "rains of weariness" and the "snows of extinction". With its crest – that physical heraldic emblem of its status as a messenger of the Divine – it seeks to crown both sun and earth. Being mortal, its flight to the sun can only fail: no matter how hard it labours to lift itself, its crest and its song, above the sun, it "can only fall". Being mortal, it can never achieve its ultimate aim – it can never crown Earth (Nature) and Sun with its crest so that they are married together, as are the conjoined Queen and King of Alchemical and Cabbalistic imagery. Its labours are "useless excess", yet it does not give up. And "meanwhile" it wears the crest itself as a symbol of its Divine purpose.

The Virtue of Chokmah is Devotion. And this is what the Skylark demonstrates and what it comes to teach Adam. Only by constant, devoted effort can he lift himself towards enlightenment. He will fall again and again in the unbalanced energies of our world, but only by determination and dedication can he help to re-establish the equilibrium and unity which can hold back the darkness²³.

'The Wild Duck' (THCP 446)

Wild Duck

The Wild Duck, the third bird to visit Adam, comes as the Angelic messenger from Sephira 3, Binah (Truth, Understanding). Binah is known as 'All Mother'. She, like Chokmah, represents the Female aspect of God, but her energies are no longer the dynamic polarities of Chokmah. Her number, 3, indicates that she is the third, stabilizing element, of what is known in Cabbala as 'The Supernal Triangle' of Sephirothic emanations at the top of the Cabbalistic Tree.

Binah is 'Mara', the 'Bitter Sea'. Her Element, like that of the wild duck, is Water; and her Archangel is Tzaphkiel, 'Beholder' or 'Eye of God'. She has no form, but she is the 'Mother of Form', the 'Womb of Matter', the egg from which all life comes. And with life comes death, when the Spirit returns to her. She is the origin of life and death, the serpent eating its tail, the Uroborus, and we know her as Nature, the Great Goddess, the Triple Goddess and all the Mother goddesses of our mythologies. At Binah, everything is potential. Nature is not yet imprisoned in matter but at Binah – the Mother of Form – this is imminent.

Ted's wild duck is female and she embodies many of the aspects of Binah. In myth, folk-lore and legend, the wild duck is associated with the Waters of Eternity, with Isis, with wisdom and with fertility, and her image is found in the ancient art and artefacts of many nations. Her 'Mother Element' is water: this is where she breeds, nests and brings up her young. Wild Duck But she is equally at home in the air and on land; and, every Autumn, attuned to the Sun's cyclical pattern around the Earth, she flies from her Arctic home towards the warmer lands where, with her lifelong mate, she will feed, make her nest and bring her ducklings to adulthood. The sight of flocks of wild ducks returning faithfully year after year to their old nesting sites, is a seasonal marker noted by farmers and hunters alike, and the wild duck is a familiar, friendly part of the domestic lives of British people – more so, for most people, than the wild goose or the swan, both of which are traditionally associated with gods and goddesses. Nevertheless, because she is attuned to the natural cycles; because of her faithful behaviour and her devoted protection of her brood; and because she lives comfortably in all four Elements, the wild duck, like the goose and the swan, has special symbolic status.

Ted's wild duck flies, as wild ducks do each Autumn, from the "swaddling" snows of the Arctic. But what is this "tower of the North Wind" from which she comes?

North is an important direction for Cabbalists for many reasons. It is traditional home of the gods, not just in Northern mythologies but also in Biblical lore. Robert Graves wrote that Jehovah, before he became a transcendent God, "lived like Boreas in the mountain to the far north"²⁴. And for NeoPlatonic Hermeticists and Cabbalists, the Pole Star, Polaris, is the throne of the Supreme Deity, and is known as the 'Eye of Heaven', the 'World Axis'²⁵. North, therefore, is the most powerful of directions: it is the location of the Divine creative energies, the source of Otherworldly powers, and the place of magic. Ted used its magic in 'Amulet' (THCP 260), which is the very first poem in Under the

North Star²⁶. And, in the circling shape of that poem, and in the wolf in particular, he embedded the circling life/death energies of Binah:

Inside the Wolf's eye, the North Star.

Inside the North Star, the Wolf's fang.

In 'The Wild Duck', Ted's "tower of the North Wind" finds particular parallels in Greek mythology, where the North Wind is Boreas, and his crown is the small star constellation Corona Borealis in the Northern sky. This constellation is known in Celtic lore as 'Caer Arianrhod', the Castle of Arianrhod, and she is the White Goddess whose titles, 'Life in Death – Death in Life'²⁷ exactly describe the circling, form-making, form-destroying energies of Binah. So, the wild duck which visits Adam "pitched from the tower" of the Goddesses castle, and Ted beautifully combines Arianrhod and Boreas in imagery of the duck's mother and father. Her mother's "shawl of stars", suggests Arianrhod's star-goddess status and the constellation of stars which represent her castle. And the duck's father, with "the black wind in his beard of stars", is black as Boreas, who is associated with Saturn, the dark skies of winter and with death.

Ted's poem, 'The Wild Duck' is, like the creature itself, steeped in mythology, and there are yet more ancient mythological associations in the "fracturing egg-zero" from which the wild duck is hatched. It's shape is the circle of eternity – the beginning and the end linked together like the Uroborus, the snake that eats its tail. It is also the egg-zero of Binah, who fractures the emptiness of space with created form. And it is the Orphic Egg – the silver egg created by the Wind and Black-Winged Night and laid in the Womb of Darkness at the beginning of time²⁸. These myths are echoed in Ted's poem as the duck gets up "out of the ooze before dawn" just as "the earth gets up out of the frosty dark". Exactly at sunrise, when the first "precarious crack of light" is reflected from the "dew" on the earth, she "hangs" momentarily, as if between the two halves of the fractured Orphic Egg: "between earth glitter and heaven glitter". Then she flies "through the precarious crack of light" to bring her message to Adam. Both she and the Earth, in Ted's poem, come from "the frosty dark at the back of the Pole Star", as if from the darkness and emptiness in which Binah first gave the disparate energies form and, so, created our material universe. Polaris, the North Star, is known as the Axle of the World, the hub of the wheel around which the starry heavens, the fabric of our universe, revolves. That it is also known as 'the Eye of Heaven', suggests, too, the duck's connection with the Archangel of Binah, Tzaphkiel, whose title is 'Eye of God'.

The duck comes to Adam "Quacking Wake Wake". What she wants him to do is follow her example: to get himself up out of the ooze of mud, break through that egg of silence and ignorance in which he lies, and fly through the crack he makes, however precarious it may be, towards the warmth of the Sun, which is the only source of life and light. In other words, he must break the ice of inertia in which he has swaddled himself and make the first precarious move towards enlightenment and hope.

'The Swift comes the swift' (THCP 447)

Swift

The swift is the fourth sacred “instructor” to visit Adam and, so, is associated with Sephira 4, Chesed (Love, Mercy, Sorrow) on the Sephirothic Tree. Chesed is the first Sephira below the ‘Abyss’ which separates the unformed, immaterial energies of The Supernal Triangle (Sephiroth 1, 2 and 3) from the world of form and matter on the lower part of the Tree.

“The Swift”, Ted said in his BBC introduction to this poem, “has difficulty in bringing himself to a stop in this world of mere matter”, and the swift “does nothing by halves, never delays”. So, no sooner has it arrived over Adam, than it is gone again, casting aside the “two arm two leg article” and all that is associated with the physical body (its own and Adam’s) and hurling itself, “as if” back where it came from, “beyond” the rooftops of the world known to Adam and to us.

The number 4, which is the number of Chesed from which the swift comes, can be written as $2 + 2$. In NeoPlatonic Cabbala, this symbolically represents the combination of the abstract energies of Chokmah (the number of which is 2) which lies directly above Chesed on the Pillar of Mercy on the Cabbalistic Tree, and the mirroring of those energies in the world of matter and form. 4, therefore, is said to represent the Principle of Creation (All Father, Chokmah, 2) “manifesting as the four elements out of which all things are created”²⁹. But 4 also represents the cross of matter, the equal-armed cross which symbolizes the conjoined dualities of $2+2$.

These conjoined dualities are present throughout Ted’s poem. There is the ordinary, familiar swift (uncapitalized in the title), the migratory bird, Apu Apu, of the species Apodidae (meaning ‘without legs’), which comes to Northern Europe each Spring from the tropical lands where it winters (i.e. from “beyond” the lands where the “lightning-split” oak flourishes). This is the bird which Ted described so beautifully in his earlier poem, ‘Swifts’ (THCP 315). The bird which swims through the air at tremendous speed, screaming as it flies; which hunts minute insects at extraordinary altitudes and skims low over the mirror-surface of lakes to pick up immature insect nymphs. This is the “mole-dark”, “little goblin savage” of Ted’s earlier poem. And it is ‘The Devil’s Bird’ of country folk-lore, the “snarl-gape”, screaming bird, which crawls on stunted legs into the wall-cracks and roof-eaves of the buildings where it nests.

Inseparable from this familiar, earth-bound swift, however, is The Swift (capitalized in the title): the divine messenger which is sacred to the Great Goddess, for which reason its annual reappearance in our world has always been regarded as a sign of luck and renewed fertility. The sacred Swift comes from the realms “beyond” our material world. It flies through the lightning crack in the Creator’s “great oak of light” – which may equally refer to the magical Druidic oak and its connection with the sky and thunder gods and the Celtic goddesses of fire and fertility, and to the Cabbalistic Tree down which the Creator’s lightning flash transmits the energies of the Source. The Swift punctures the “veils of worlds”, flying constantly between spirit and matter, through the veil of illusion which blinds us to anything beyond our material world. Its one wing is “below mineral limit”, existing in the solid, mineral world of the Earth. Its other wing is “above dream and number”, in the realm of vision and abstraction. It is equally at home

hunting “the winged mote of death”, the last vestige of our mortality, deep “into” the eye of the sun (the Creator) and picking the “nymph of life / off the mirror of the lake of atoms”. And this ‘lake of atoms’ may be the ever-changing mirror surface of a worldly lake or the creative atomic surface of the sun. In either case The Swift, here, links death and life, just as in the earlier line it “Shears between life and death”, cutting and separating them. Like Alchemical Mercury, Ted’s mercurial Swift makes and unmakes; and it is the agent of death and rebirth.

Appropriately, the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet on which Cabbala is based, is Daleth, the Door which is the ‘Door of Illumination’. Four is also the number of the sacred Mysteries, and to understand these Mysteries we must die to the material, egotistical part of our nature and find within us the spiritual Self, so that we may be reborn as a whole, more balanced, individual.

Swift

The Swift had perfected this art. It “falls out of the blindness” – which is equally the blinding light of the sun to which it flies and the blindness of the ego-bound self – and it “swims up from the molten”, rising, like the nymph, from the lake of atoms into which all life decomposes at death. So, it joins immaterial to material, “Shadow to shadow”: And it is unlikely to be mere accident that places “Shadow” at the beginning of a line so that it is capitalized and symbolic (like The Swift), unlike the ordinary, material “shadow” to which it is joined.

In its united state, Shadow joined to shadow, the bird “resumes proof” – becomes factual and real – a proof copy of all created swifts. And in these final lines of the poem it seems to rise, like the mythical phoenix from the “papery ashes” of its own “uncontrollable burning” energies. But it nests, too, here on the printed page, born into “papery” physical existence by the burning, abstract energies of Ted’s memory and imagination and the will and determination with which he created the poem. Here is proof that for Adam and his descendents the seemingly magical act of creation is possible. And this is what Ted’s Swift comes to demonstrate to Adam.

‘The Unknown Wren’ (THCP 447-8)

Wren

“Then a jenny-wren comes to Adam”: “The wren who cannot be made other than he is”³⁰. ‘Jenny-wren’ is a common country and nursery name for the brown wren, male or female, and this bird is also known as ‘Cuddy vran’, (Bran’s sparrow), the prophetic bird of the god-king of early Britain. For the Druids, and for the early British Bards the wren was a sacred bird; a fire-bird associated with thunder and lightning; and the ‘little king’ associated with fertility and the cycles of Nature. Oracles were drawn from its behaviour and its song was used in divination.

Because of the wren’s ancient sacred status it is still considered unlucky to kill the wren or to disturb its nest. But on December 26th, Saint Stephen’s Day, in a ritual which is believed to have been part of the earliest celebrations of the Winter solstice, and which

is still practiced in some form in parts of Britain and France, the wren is hunted as 'King of the Old Year', caged, and paraded from house to house by 'Wren Boys'. The traditional wren song which they chant conveys the wren's status and importance:

The wren, the wren, the king of the birds
On Stephen's day was caught in the furze.
His body is small, but his spirit is great
We pray you good people to give us a treat.

Wren Day was celebrated in Ancient Greece and Rome; wren brooches have been found in sixth-century, Celtic, burial mounds; and many old, dialect, wren songs, some of which were first collected and published in Tom Thumb's Pretty Song Book in 1742, are still sung today³¹.

For all these reasons, in addition to Ted's own description of the birds which visited Adam as "Divine birds", the wren which comes to Adam is more than just the familiar, tiny, brown bird whose Latin name, *Troglodytes troglodytes* ('dweller in caves'), describes its secretive, self-concealing habits. Wrens live in the dark tangles of ivy and in the crevices of dry-stone walls, rather than in caves; and they are rarely seen, although their busy, loud, ringing song and 'ticking' warning is constantly heard in the countryside. When they are seen, they are just as Ted describes the singing wren in his poem: "head squatted back", "upstart tail" cocked, "pin-beak stretched" towards the sky – a tiny, "throbbing" "song-ball" of brown feathers.

The "Unknown Wren / Hidden in Wren", is clearly the sacred, elemental bird, the Divine messenger, the "guardian exemplary" spirit. Everywhere in the poem, the "unalterable" "World-proof Wren" inhabits the ordinary bird. And again, as in 'The Swift comes the swift', the capitalization of 'Wren' suggests the Divine status of the Wren within the common wren.

Only in two places is the word 'wren' uncapitalized.

In the first, it is used of the "blur of throbbing" of the worldly bird, in which the "nearly out of control" Spirit "Wren sings only Wren" (both capitalized). The ordinary wren is described in human terms, as if the visible, worldly bird is suffering "Electrocution by the god of wrens" – a worldly god, thought up by a human observer.

The second case is more striking. The bird sings as if "in death-rapture", controlled by the spirit within. In this state, "imminent death" (which only the ordinary worldly bird can suffer) "only makes the wren more Wren-like". In death, one would expect that the Wren spirit will be released, but this is not what Ted says in the poem. And to understand why he exemplifies the "Wren-like" spirit in worldly terms of "harder sunlight" and "realer earth-light", it is necessary to digress and look at the position of this bird on the Cabbalistic Tree and the mythology associated with that position.

Wren is the fifth bird to visit Adam, so comes from Sephira 5, Gevurah (Power, Strength), which lies on the Pillar of Form immediately below Binah, the 'Mother of Form'.

Gevurah, like Chesed (Sephira 4), lies in the material world below the Abyss, and it reflects the immaterial, unformed but formative energies of Binah. The lightning flash from the Divine Source passes from Chesed to Gevurah and these two Sephiroth work together, but the need to maintain balance between them (as between force and form, anabolism and catabolism) is constant. Chesed creates form in an anabolic, dynamic, unbounded, fluid way. Gevurah preserves form and imposes limits, so that although, as in the Wren, the energies are “almost out of control”, they yet remain within boundaries. Gevurah also catabolizes form: breaking it down so that it does not become fixed and rigid but allows for change and death. Gevurah, it is said, “is the dynamic element in life that drives through and over obstacles”. It is “only destructive to that which is temporal” but “is the servant of [that] which is eternal; for when... all that is impermanent has been eaten away, the eternal and incorporeal realities shine forth”³². Gevurah’s energies, like the Wren’s song, flow out into the world.

The energy of Gevurah, Sephira 5, is the energy of the number 5 which is “the essential number of life”, and is symbolized by the pentagram. In Cabbalistic imagery, the pentagram represents the Human Form Divine and it combines the spiritual and material energies (in our mundane Self and our spiritual Self) which constantly contend for supremacy. Our body is the battlefield, the dark matter, the “wind-buffed wood” (buffed and buffeted by the winds of the world) like that which Ted’s Wren inhabits, and it is in this wood that the “battle-frenzy” must take place. It is here, that the Spirit, the “World-proof” pure energy, the Song is to be found “wresting daybreak” so that illumination (the first dawning of light in the human being) can occur and “a transfiguration” can take place .

Wren

Gevurah’s energies battle to preserve the Spirit without destroying the material form. So, Wren, in this sequence of poems which began with song, displays the courage and power of Gevurah by maintaining that spirit song within the bodily form of wren. Only whilst “Wren sings Wren” can formlessness, chaos and death be held at bay. So, the common wren, knotted to the twig of life, is a “song-ball of tongues”. And, so, the more Wren-like he is the more he wields the form-preserving powers of Gevurah and the more real is the “sunlight” and the “earth-light”. And when “Wren sleeps”, everything – “the star-drape heavens” and the “bowl” of Earth – becomes again formless dream and idea, like the potential energy of Chesed which Gevurah must constantly shape.

The ‘Spiritual Experience’ of Gevurah is the ‘Vision of Power’. And the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, He, signifies “life vitality, animation and the breath of sanctity”³³. Ted’s Wren, with its power, its energy and its song, demonstrates all of this. It also demonstrates to Adam the will-power and the courage and the constant effort which is required to awaken the Spiritual Self from its sleep within him, and to keep it alive, under control and in precarious balance in the material world.

Gevurah’s ‘Virtue’ is Courage and Energy, but balance is essential. Wise kings (and Wren is King of the Birds) exercise control and do not impose rigid forms of rule and

government on themselves or their subjects. Nor do they dedicate themselves wholly to the spiritual or let extremes of spiritual expression take over their kingdom. Only when balance is maintained can the “lifted sun” of Spirit and the “drenched [baptized] woods” of the body “rejoice with trembling”: only then, can the ‘Magical Image’ of Gevurah, which is a crowned warrior-king in his chariot, be seen.

Throughout Ted’s poem, Wren fights for this balance. “But now”, with the promise of light and transformation at the end of the poem, Wren “reigns” and Wren is in control.

Now, truly, Wren is King of the birds and “WREN OF WRENS!”.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

19. Fortune, D. *The Mystical Quabala*, The society of Inner Light, London, 1998. p.111.

20. Ted Hughes’ mss. note, transcribed and quoted in an e-mail to me by Keith Sagar, 22 Feb. 2009.

21. The Zohar, Rosenkreutzer, Altona, 1785. in Roob, Op.cit. p.276.

22. Fludd’s image, ‘Intigrae Naturae Speculum Artisue imago’, comes from his *Utrisque Cosmi Vol.1*, and is reproduced in Roob, op.cit . p.501.

23. It is interesting to see these poems in terms of Ted’s lifelong interest in ecology and his view of the essential role we all must play in re-establishing and maintaining the balance of Nature.

24. Graves, R. *The White Goddess*, Faber, 1977, p.440.

25. Philoletes. *Museum hermeticum*, Frankfurt, 1678, p.655.

26. Hughes, T. *Under the North Star*, Faber, 1981.

27. Graves, *ibid.* pp.98-100.

28. From this egg, Eros emerged to set the Universe in motion. Graves, *Greek Myths*, Cassell, 1981. p.10.

29. Helene, C. *The Sacred Science of Numbers*, DeVorss, USA, 1997. p.27.

30. Ted Hughes’ mss. note, transcribed and quoted in an e-mail to me by Keith Sagar, 22 Feb. 2009.

31. My husband remembers singing this song as a boy on the Isle of Man: “We’ll hunt the wren said Robin-a-Bobbin’, We’ll hunt the wren said Richie to Robin, We’ll hunt the wren said Jack O’ the Land. We’ll hunt the wren said everyone./ Oh where, Oh where?,

said Robbin-a-Bobbin... / In yonder green bush, said Robbin-a-Bobbin... etc.”.

32. Fortune, D. Op. cit. p. 174-5.

33. Heline, Op.cit . p.43.

Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama, text and illustrations © Ann Skea 2010. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Go To Next Chapter](#)

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalAdam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama. Part 2. 'And the Falcon came', 'The Skylark came', 'The Wild Duck', 'The Swift comes the swift', 'The Unknown Wren'.

© Ann Skea

All page references (THCP) are to Ted Hughes Collected Poems, Faber, 2003.

'And the Falcon came' (THCP 445)

Falcon

Falcons are one of the smallest of the great eagles, and for centuries they have been captured and trained by humans for hunting purposes. They are powerful birds; swift and deadly hunters, which soar effortlessly high in the heavens and seem to drop from the sun onto their prey. Their golden eyes, like the “round angelic eye” of Ted’s hawk in ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ (THCP 19), resemble the sun’s orb, and in many countries they are still regarded as sacred birds and as offspring, like the Egyptian falcon-god, Horus, of the great Sun God. They are associated, too, with goddesses. Circe, in her falcon form, is related to Helios, the Sun; Freya hovers over the Earth in falcon garments; the Great Goddess, Frigg, is also a falcon. All – gods and goddesses – are able to move with ease between heaven and earth; all represent nobility, power and fertility.

In Cabbala, the first ‘offspring’ (so-to-speak) of the Divine Source is the emanation of pure white light which appears at Kether, the Sephira at the Crown of the Cabbalistic Tree in the topmost World of Atziluth. This is where, in Alchemical and Cabbalistic symbolism and imagery, the great eagle /sun-bird resides. In our material world of Assiah, however, where we receive only reflected light from the upper Worlds, it is appropriate that the first angelic messenger to appear to Adam should be the symbolic Falcon (the word is capitalized throughout the poem) but also just an ordinary bird. This Falcon is very like Ted’s hawk in Hawk in the Rain, and it is remarkable that in the very first poem of Ted’s first published book his protagonist drowns “in the drumming ploughland” whilst the hawk hangs “effortlessly at height” holding “all creation in a weightless quiet”. Adam and the hawk were there in Ted’s work from the start, but Ted’s language and ‘voice’ in ‘And the Falcon came’ is simpler and more direct than it was in

his earlier poem. His Falcon is mineral hard, his “gunmetal feathers”, his “bullet-brow”, his deadly talons and his “tooled bill” have one purpose only, and that is “the reconstruction of Falcon”. It is entirely consistent with this Falcon’s position at Kether, Sephira 1, which is titled ‘Unity’ and which, in Hebrew Cabbala, is given the God-name EHEIEH – (translated as ‘I am’ or ‘I will be’) – that this bird has but a single purpose from which he will “not falter”.

Falcon

“The gods of Kether” says one Cabbalistic text, “are terrible gods which eat their children” And Kether is “pure being unlimited by form or matter”¹⁹. This applies perfectly to Ted’s Falcon as a reflection of that Atziluthic pure being. He is ruthless and powerful, “dividing the mountain”, “hurling the world away”, bent on “collision” and destruction. He grasps “complete” in his talons the “crux of rays” which, in Cabbala, symbolize the power of Kether to cross-link all polarities in order to create unity, and which also suggests the lightning flash of energy from the first emanation which zig-zags down the Tree from Sephira to Sephira, connecting heaven and earth.

And, since Kether is the Sephira from which all comes and to which all must return, this falcon holds in its talons “a first, last single blow”.

Ted’s poem, however, also describes a real bird and the normal, familiar hunting behaviour of this bird. So, throughout the poem, the Cabbalistic energies of this Angelic guide from the Worlds above the World of Assiah, are reflected in the real behaviour of a real bird. It “plucks out the ghost”, which is the life of its prey, and strips down this dead creature “to its component parts”. The “ghost” – that immaterial spark of life – is the spark of Divine Spirit which is to be reunited with the Divine Source; and the “hot flutter of earth” is not just a vivid image of fear, hot blood, and flying fur and feathers, it suggests, also, the fluttering presence of the hot, fecund, female Spirit of Nature.

This Falcon, in which all things are united, comes to Adam to demonstrate to him and teach him single-minded action, ruthless will, and determination to get to the heart of anything he tackles. It demonstrates, too, the ability to find the essence of earthly life and unite it with the pure “eye-flame” – the fiery, explosive energy – of the heavenly Source.

‘The Skylark came’ (THCP 445-6)

Skylark

The next birds to appear to Adam is the Skylark “who labours the whole day singing”²⁰. As the second bird and the second Angelic messenger, it is associated with Sephira 2, Chokmah (Wisdom, Creativity). At Chokmah, the first division of Kether’s pure energy takes place and, with duality, unity and stable equilibrium is lost.

Chokmah, in Cabbala, is known as ‘All Father’, the fertilizing Male Principle of the Cabbalistic Tree, but Chokmah is the place where male/female duality, like all other dualities, begins. It is here that the Female Principle of God becomes separated from

the Male Principle, to eventually become exiled in matter, constantly seeking reunion. In the highest, Atziluthic World of Emanations, where the energies are still unbounded by form, unlimited, endlessly potent and dynamic, the Female Principle (Nature) is still pure vibration.

Artape

The reflection of this in the material World of Assiah is the Hermetic NeoPlatonic image of her as Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom and, in common Cabbalistic imagery, it is her ladder of knowledge and creativity which, as in Ted's poem, is the "swinging ladder" which is "hooked to the sun" and connects heaven and earth. This is the Biblical Jacob's ladder, which appeared as Jacob (like Adam) lay on the earth and dreamed. On this ladder Jacob saw "the angels of God ascending and descending" (Genesis 28:12-13), just as Ted's divine birds visit Adam and leave. Sophia's ladder is also the golden chain by which, as the Hebrew Zohar says, "Everything is connected with everything, right through to the nethermost end of all the links"²¹ or, as Robert Fludd drew it in 1617, "leads from the hand of God via Virgin Nature" to the Earth, where "man imitates Nature and seeks to improve it"²². By means of this ladder or chain, we can climb, with Nature's help, out of the darkness of ignorance into the Divine light.

In Adam and the Sacred Nine, Nature's song and her constant labour for reunion with the male Principle, is reflected in the Skylark, which is her emissary. It, like the Archangel of Chokmah, Ratzel, is 'Herald of the Deity' and herald of the dawn of enlightenment. Early-rising country-folk are still said to 'get up with the lark', which is known as 'the bird of dawn'. Its crested head, too, associates it with other crested birds like the cockerel and the hoopoe, both of which are regarded in myth and folk-lore as divine messengers and heralds of a new day and a new beginning.

Skylarks sing constantly as they fly and their song is one of the most persistent and noticeable summer sounds of the English countryside, still clearly to be heard when the bird itself is no more than a tiny speck far up in the heavens. Their flight, too, is effortful and distinctive: their wings are constantly in motion and only stop (with their song) when they plummet back to earth and the grass in which they nest. The lift and fall of the Skylark's flight, and the heights to which it climbs, singing, as if "to thatch the sun" with bird-joy (a useless endeavour, to erect a frail and worldly roof over the immense and powerful cosmic energies of the sun), all this is beautifully captured in Ted's poem.

Skylark

The unpunctuated lines flow together like the continuous bird-song, and the repetitions – "with its song", "with its labour", "with its crest" and again, "with its song" – emphasise and enclose the bird's form and labour within that song, so that all are physically linked in the poem, just as all reflect its Divine origins and allegiances.

With its song – that fragment of the Divine creative energies – the bird labours to keep off the "rains of weariness" and the "snows of extinction". With its crest – that physical heraldic emblem of its status as a messenger of the Divine – it seeks to crown both sun and earth. Being mortal, its flight to the sun can only fail: no matter how hard it labours

to lift itself, its crest and its song, above the sun, it “can only fall”. Being mortal, it can never achieve its ultimate aim – it can never crown Earth (Nature) and Sun with its crest so that they are married together, as are the conjoined Queen and King of Alchemical and Cabbalistic imagery. Its labours are “useless excess”, yet it does not give up. And “meanwhile” it wears the crest itself as a symbol of its Divine purpose.

The Virtue of Chokmah is Devotion. And this is what the Skylark demonstrates and what it comes to teach Adam. Only by constant, devoted effort can he lift himself towards enlightenment. He will fall again and again in the unbalanced energies of our world, but only by determination and dedication can he help to re-establish the equilibrium and unity which can hold back the darkness²³.

‘The Wild Duck’ (THCP 446)

Wild Duck

The Wild Duck, the third bird to visit Adam, comes as the Angelic messenger from Sephira 3, Binah (Truth, Understanding). Binah is known as ‘All Mother’. She, like Chokmah, represents the Female aspect of God, but her energies are no longer the dynamic polarities of Chokmah. Her number, 3, indicates that she is the third, stabilizing element, of what is known in Cabbala as ‘The Supernal Triangle’ of Sephirothic emanations at the top of the Cabbalistic Tree.

Binah is ‘Mara’, the ‘Bitter Sea’. Her Element, like that of the wild duck, is Water; and her Archangel is Tzaphkiel, ‘Beholder’ or ‘Eye of God’. She has no form, but she is the ‘Mother of Form’, the ‘Womb of Matter’, the egg from which all life comes. And with life comes death, when the Spirit returns to her. She is the origin of life and death, the serpent eating its tail, the Uroborus, and we know her as Nature, the Great Goddess, the Triple Goddess and all the Mother goddesses of our mythologies. At Binah, everything is potential. Nature is not yet imprisoned in matter but at Binah – the Mother of Form – this is imminent.

Ted’s wild duck is female and she embodies many of the aspects of Binah. In myth, folk-lore and legend, the wild duck is associated with the Waters of Eternity, with Isis, with wisdom and with fertility, and her image is found in the ancient art and artefacts of many nations. Her ‘Mother Element’ is water: this is where she breeds, nests and brings up her young. Wild DuckBut she is equally at home in the air and on land; and, every Autumn, attuned to the Sun’s cyclical pattern around the Earth, she flies from her Arctic home towards the warmer lands where, with her lifelong mate, she will feed, make her nest and bring her ducklings to adulthood. The sight of flocks of wild ducks returning faithfully year after year to their old nesting sites, is a seasonal marker noted by farmers and hunters alike, and the wild duck is a familiar, friendly part of the domestic lives of British people – more so, for most people, than the wild goose or the swan, both of which are traditionally associated with gods and goddesses. Nevertheless, because she is attuned to the natural cycles; because of her faithful behaviour and her devoted protection of her brood; and because she lives comfortably in all four Elements, the wild duck, like the goose and the swan, has special symbolic status.

Ted's wild duck flies, as wild ducks do each Autumn, from the "swaddling" snows of the Arctic. But what is this "tower of the North Wind" from which she comes?

North is an important direction for Cabbalists for many reasons. It is traditional home of the gods, not just in Northern mythologies but also in Biblical lore. Robert Graves wrote that Jehovah, before he became a transcendent God, "lived like Boreas in the mountain to the far north"²⁴. And for NeoPlatonic Hermeticists and Cabbalists, the Pole Star, Polaris, is the throne of the Supreme Deity, and is known as the 'Eye of Heaven', the 'World Axis'²⁵. North, therefore, is the most powerful of directions: it is the location of the Divine creative energies, the source of Otherworldly powers, and the place of magic. Ted used its magic in 'Amulet' (THCP 260), which is the very first poem in *Under the North Star*²⁶. And, in the circling shape of that poem, and in the wolf in particular, he embedded the circling life/death energies of Binah:

Inside the Wolf's eye, the North Star.

Inside the North Star, the Wolf's fang.

In 'The Wild Duck', Ted's "tower of the North Wind" finds particular parallels in Greek mythology, where the North Wind is Boreas, and his crown is the small star constellation Corona Borealis in the Northern sky. This constellation is known in Celtic lore as 'Caer Arianrhod', the Castle of Arianrhod, and she is the White Goddess whose titles, 'Life in Death – Death in Life'²⁷ exactly describe the circling, form-making, form-destroying energies of Binah. So, the wild duck which visits Adam "pitched from the tower" of the Goddesses castle, and Ted beautifully combines Arianrhod and Boreas in imagery of the duck's mother and father. Her mother's "shawl of stars", suggests Arianrhod's star-goddess status and the constellation of stars which represent her castle. And the duck's father, with "the black wind in his beard of stars", is black as Boreas, who is associated with Saturn, the dark skies of winter and with death.

Ted's poem, 'The Wild Duck' is, like the creature itself, steeped in mythology, and there are yet more ancient mythological associations in the "fracturing egg-zero" from which the wild duck is hatched. Its shape is the circle of eternity – the beginning and the end linked together like the Uroborus, the snake that eats its tail. It is also the egg-zero of Binah, who fractures the emptiness of space with created form. And it is the Orphic Egg – the silver egg created by the Wind and Black-Winged Night and laid in the Womb of Darkness at the beginning of time²⁸. These myths are echoed in Ted's poem as the duck gets up "out of the ooze before dawn" just as "the earth gets up out of the frosty dark". Exactly at sunrise, when the first "precarious crack of light" is reflected from the "dew" on the earth, she "hangs" momentarily, as if between the two halves of the fractured Orphic Egg: "between earth glitter and heaven glitter". Then she flies "through the precarious crack of light" to bring her message to Adam. Both she and the Earth, in Ted's poem, come from "the frosty dark at the back of the Pole Star", as if from the darkness and emptiness in which Binah first gave the disparate energies form and, so, created our material universe. Polaris, the North Star, is known as the Axle of the World, the hub of the wheel around which the starry heavens, the fabric of our universe, revolves. That it is also known as 'the Eye of Heaven', suggests, too, the duck's

connection with the Archangel of Binah, Tzaphkiel, whose title is 'Eye of God'.

The duck comes to Adam "Quacking Wake Wake". What she wants him to do is follow her example: to get himself up out of the ooze of mud, break through that egg of silence and ignorance in which he lies, and fly through the crack he makes, however precarious it may be, towards the warmth of the Sun, which is the only source of life and light. In other words, he must break the ice of inertia in which he has swaddled himself and make the first precarious move towards enlightenment and hope.

'The Swift comes the swift' (THCP 447)

Swift

The swift is the fourth sacred "instructor" to visit Adam and, so, is associated with Sephira 4, Chesed (Love, Mercy, Sorrow) on the Sephirothic Tree. Chesed is the first Sephira below the 'Abyss' which separates the unformed, immaterial energies of The Supernal Triangle (Sephiroth 1, 2 and 3) from the world of form and matter on the lower part of the Tree.

"The Swift", Ted said in his BBC introduction to this poem, "has difficulty in bringing himself to a stop in this world of mere matter", and the swift "does nothing by halves, never delays". So, no sooner has it arrived over Adam, than it is gone again, casting aside the "two arm two leg article" and all that is associated with the physical body (its own and Adam's) and hurling itself, "as if" back where it came from, "beyond" the rooftops of the world known to Adam and to us.

The number 4, which is the number of Chesed from which the swift comes, can be written as $2 + 2$. In NeoPlatonic Cabbala, this symbolically represents the combination of the abstract energies of Chokmah (the number of which is 2) which lies directly above Chesed on the Pillar of Mercy on the Cabbalistic Tree, and the mirroring of those energies in the world of matter and form. 4, therefore, is said to represent the Principle of Creation (All Father, Chokmah, 2) "manifesting as the four elements out of which all things are created"²⁹. But 4 also represents the cross of matter, the equal-armed cross which symbolizes the conjoined dualities of $2+2$.

These conjoined dualities are present throughout Ted's poem. There is the ordinary, familiar swift (uncapitalized in the title), the migratory bird, Apu Apu, of the species Apodidae (meaning 'without legs'), which comes to Northern Europe each Spring from the tropical lands where it winters (i.e. from "beyond" the lands where the "lightning-split" oak flourishes). This is the bird which Ted described so beautifully in his earlier poem, 'Swifts' (THCP 315). The bird which swims through the air at tremendous speed, screaming as it flies; which hunts minute insects at extraordinary altitudes and skims low over the mirror-surface of lakes to pick up immature insect nymphs. This is the "mole-dark", "little goblin savage" of Ted's earlier poem. And it is 'The Devil's Bird' of country folk-lore, the "snarl-gape", screaming bird, which crawls on stunted legs into the wall-cracks and roof-eaves of the buildings where it nests.

Inseparable from this familiar, earth-bound swift, however, is The Swift (capitalized in the title): the divine messenger which is sacred to the Great Goddess, for which reason its annual reappearance in our world has always been regarded as a sign of luck and renewed fertility. The sacred Swift comes from the realms “beyond” our material world. It flies through the lightning crack in the Creator’s “great oak of light” – which may equally refer to the magical Druidic oak and its connection with the sky and thunder gods and the Celtic goddesses of fire and fertility, and to the Cabbalistic Tree down which the Creator’s lightning flash transmits the energies of the Source. The Swift punctures the “veils of worlds”, flying constantly between spirit and matter, through the veil of illusion which blinds us to anything beyond our material world. Its one wing is “below mineral limit”, existing in the solid, mineral world of the Earth. Its other wing is “above dream and number”, in the realm of vision and abstraction. It is equally at home hunting “the winged mote of death”, the last vestige of our mortality, deep “into” the eye of the sun (the Creator) and picking the “nymph of life / off the mirror of the lake of atoms”. And this ‘lake of atoms’ may be the ever-changing mirror surface of a worldly lake or the creative atomic surface of the sun. In either case The Swift, here, links death and life, just as in the earlier line it “Shears between life and death”, cutting and separating them. Like Alchemical Mercury, Ted’s mercurial Swift makes and unmakes; and it is the agent of death and rebirth.

Appropriately, the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet on which Cabbala is based, is Daleth, the Door which is the ‘Door of Illumination’. Four is also the number of the sacred Mysteries, and to understand these Mysteries we must die to the material, egotistical part of our nature and find within us the spiritual Self, so that we may be reborn as a whole, more balanced, individual.

Swift

The Swift had perfected this art. It “falls out of the blindness” – which is equally the blinding light of the sun to which it flies and the blindness of the ego-bound self – and it “swims up from the molten”, rising, like the nymph, from the lake of atoms into which all life decomposes at death. So, it joins immaterial to material, “Shadow to shadow”: And it is unlikely to be mere accident that places “Shadow” at the beginning of a line so that it is capitalized and symbolic (like The Swift), unlike the ordinary, material “shadow” to which it is joined.

In its united state, Shadow joined to shadow, the bird “resumes proof” – becomes factual and real – a proof copy of all created swifts. And in these final lines of the poem it seems to rise, like the mythical phoenix from the “papery ashes” of its own “uncontrollable burning” energies. But it nests, too, here on the printed page, born into “papery” physical existence by the burning, abstract energies of Ted’s memory and imagination and the will and determination with which he created the poem. Here is proof that for Adam and his descendents the seemingly magical act of creation is possible. And this is what Ted’s Swift comes to demonstrate to Adam.

‘The Unknown Wren’ (THCP 447-8)

Wren

“Then a jenny-wren comes to Adam”: “The wren who cannot be made other than he is”³⁰. ‘Jenny-wren’ is a common country and nursery name for the brown wren, male or female, and this bird is also known as ‘Cuddy vran’, (Bran’s sparrow), the prophetic bird of the god-king of early Britain. For the Druids, and for the early British Bards the wren was a sacred bird; a fire-bird associated with thunder and lightning; and the ‘little king’ associated with fertility and the cycles of Nature. Oracles were drawn from its behaviour and its song was used in divination.

Because of the wren’s ancient sacred status it is still considered unlucky to kill the wren or to disturb its nest. But on December 26th, Saint Stephen’s Day, in a ritual which is believed to have been part of the earliest celebrations of the Winter solstice, and which is still practiced in some form in parts of Britain and France, the wren is hunted as ‘King of the Old Year’, caged, and paraded from house to house by ‘Wren Boys’. The traditional wren song which they chant conveys the wren’s status and importance:

The wren, the wren, the king of the birds
On Stephen’s day was caught in the furze.
His body is small, but his spirit is great
We pray you good people to give us a treat.

Wren Day was celebrated in Ancient Greece and Rome; wren brooches have been found in sixth-century, Celtic, burial mounds; and many old, dialect, wren songs, some of which were first collected and published in Tom Thumb’s Pretty Song Book in 1742, are still sung today³¹.

For all these reasons, in addition to Ted’s own description of the birds which visited Adam as “Divine birds”, the wren which comes to Adam is more than just the familiar, tiny, brown bird whose Latin name, *Troglodytes troglodytes* (‘dweller in caves’), describes its secretive, self-concealing habits. Wrens live in the dark tangles of ivy and in the crevices of dry-stone walls, rather than in caves; and they are rarely seen, although their busy, loud, ringing song and ‘ticking’ warning is constantly heard in the countryside. When they are seen, they are just as Ted describes the singing wren in his poem: “head squatted back”, “upstart tail” cocked, “pin-beak stretched” towards the sky – a tiny, “throbbing” “song-ball” of brown feathers.

The “Unknown Wren / Hidden in Wren”, is clearly the sacred, elemental bird, the Divine messenger, the “guardian exemplary” spirit. Everywhere in the poem, the “unalterable” “World-proof Wren” inhabits the ordinary bird. And again, as in ‘The Swift comes the swift’, the capitalization of ‘Wren’ suggests the Divine status of the Wren within the common wren.

Only in two places is the word ‘wren’ uncapitalized.

In the first, it is used of the “blur of throbbing” of the worldly bird, in which the “nearly out of control” Spirit “Wren sings only Wren” (both capitalized). The ordinary wren is described in human terms, as if the visible, worldly bird is suffering “Electrocution by the god of wrens” – a worldly god, thought up by a human observer.

The second case is more striking. The bird sings as if “in death-rapture”, controlled by the spirit within. In this state, “imminent death” (which only the ordinary worldly bird can suffer) “only makes the wren more Wren-like”. In death, one would expect that the Wren spirit will be released, but this is not what Ted says in the poem. And to understand why he exemplifies the “Wren-like” spirit in worldly terms of “harder sunlight” and “realer earth-light”, it is necessary to digress and look at the position of this bird on the Cabbalistic Tree and the mythology associated with that position.

Wren is the fifth bird to visit Adam, so comes from Sephira 5, Gevurah (Power, Strength), which lies on the Pillar of Form immediately below Binah, the ‘Mother of Form’.

Gevurah, like Chesed (Sephira 4), lies in the material world below the Abyss, and it reflects the immaterial, unformed but formative energies of Binah. The lightning flash from the Divine Source passes from Chesed to Gevurah and these two Sephiroth work together, but the need to maintain balance between them (as between force and form, anabolism and catabolism) is constant. Chesed creates form in an anabolic, dynamic, unbounded, fluid way. Gevurah preserves form and imposes limits, so that although, as in the Wren, the energies are “almost out of control”, they yet remain within boundaries. Gevurah also catabolizes form: breaking it down so that it does not become fixed and rigid but allows for change and death. Gevurah, it is said, “is the dynamic element in life that drives through and over obstacles”. It is “only destructive to that which is temporal” but “is the servant of [that] which is eternal; for when... all that is impermanent has been eaten away, the eternal and incorporeal realities shine forth”³². Gevurah’s energies, like the Wren’s song, flow out into the world.

The energy of Gevurah, Sephira 5, is the energy of the number 5 which is “the essential number of life”, and is symbolized by the pentagram. In Cabbalistic imagery, the pentagram represents the Human Form Divine and it combines the spiritual and material energies (in our mundane Self and our spiritual Self) which constantly contend for supremacy. Our body is the battlefield, the dark matter, the “wind-buffed wood” (buffed and buffeted by the winds of the world) like that which Ted’s Wren inhabits, and it is in this wood that the “battle-frenzy” must take place. It is here, that the Spirit, the “World-proof” pure energy, the Song is to be found “wresting daybreak” so that illumination (the first dawning of light in the human being) can occur and “a transfiguration” can take place .

Wren

Gevurah’s energies battle to preserve the Spirit without destroying the material form. So, Wren, in this sequence of poems which began with song, displays the courage and power of Gevurah by maintaining that spirit song within the bodily form of wren. Only whilst “Wren sings Wren” can formlessness, chaos and death be held at bay. So, the common wren, knotted to the twig of life, is a “song-ball of tongues”. And, so, the more Wren-like he is the more he wields the form-preserving powers of Gevurah and the more real is the “sunlight” and the “earth-light”. And when “Wren sleeps”, everything –

“the star-drape heavens” and the “bowl” of Earth – becomes again formless dream and idea, like the potential energy of Chesed which Gevurah must constantly shape.

The ‘Spiritual Experience’ of Gevurah is the ‘Vision of Power’. And the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, He, signifies “life vitality, animation and the breath of sanctity”³³. Ted’s Wren, with its power, its energy and its song, demonstrates all of this. It also demonstrates to Adam the will-power and the courage and the constant effort which is required to awaken the Spiritual Self from its sleep within him, and to keep it alive, under control and in precarious balance in the material world.

Gevurah’s ‘Virtue’ is Courage and Energy, but balance is essential. Wise kings (and Wren is King of the Birds) exercise control and do not impose rigid forms of rule and government on themselves or their subjects. Nor do they dedicate themselves wholly to the spiritual or let extremes of spiritual expression take over their kingdom. Only when balance is maintained can the “lifted sun” of Spirit and the “drenched [baptized] woods” of the body “rejoice with trembling”: only then, can the ‘Magical Image’ of Gevurah, which is a crowned warrior-king in his chariot, be seen.

Throughout Ted’s poem, Wren fights for this balance. “But now”, with the promise of light and transformation at the end of the poem, Wren “reigns” and Wren is in control.

Now, truly, Wren is King of the birds and “WREN OF WRENS!”.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

19. Fortune, D. *The Mystical Quabala*, The society of Inner Light, London, 1998. p.111.

20. Ted Hughes’ mss. note, transcribed and quoted in an e-mail to me by Keith Sagar, 22 Feb. 2009.

21. *The Zohar*, Rosenkreutzer, Altona, 1785. in Roob, *Op.cit.* p.276.

22. Fludd’s image, ‘*Intigrae Naturae Speculum Artisue imago*’, comes from his *Utrisque Cosmi Vol.1*, and is reproduced in Roob, *op.cit.* p.501.

23. It is interesting to see these poems in terms of Ted’s lifelong interest in ecology and his view of the essential role we all must play in re-establishing and maintaining the balance of Nature.

24. Graves, R. *The White Goddess*, Faber, 1977, p.440.

25. Philoletes. *Museum hermeticum*, Frankfurt, 1678, p.655.

26. Hughes, T. *Under the North Star*, Faber, 1981.

27. Graves, *ibid.* pp.98-100.

28. From this egg, Eros emerged to set the Universe in motion. Graves, Greek Myths, Cassell, 1981. p.10.

29. Helene, C. The Sacred Science of Numbers, DeVorss, USA, 1997. p.27.

30. Ted Hughes' mss. note, transcribed and quoted in an e-mail to me by Keith Sagar, 22 Feb. 2009.

31. My husband remembers singing this song as a boy on the Isle of Man: "We'll hunt the wren said Robin-a-Bobbin', We'll hunt the wren said Richie to Robin, We'll hunt the wren said Jack O' the Land. We'll hunt the wren said everyone./ Oh where, Oh where?, said Robbin-a-Bobbin... / In yonder green bush, said Robbin-a-Bobbin... etc."

32. Fortune, D. Op. cit. p. 174-5.

33. Helene, Op.cit . p.43.

Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama, text and illustrations © Ann Skea 2010. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Go To Next Chapter](#)

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalAdam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama. Part 3. 'And Owl', 'The Dove Came', 'The Crow came to Adam', 'And the Phoenix has come', 'Light', 'Bud-tipped twig', 'The sole of the foot'.

© Ann Skea

All page references (THCP) are to Ted Hughes Collected Poems, Faber, 2003.

'And Owl' (THCP 448-9)

Owl

"And Owl" comes. "Owl who remembers everything"³⁴. Owl, specifically "a barn-owl"³⁵, with its white, ghostly mask and silent flight, is a creature of the night in the English countryside but also, in mythology, a bird sacred to Athene, Goddess of war, wisdom, music and craft, and to Hecate and Lilith, Moon Goddesses of magic and death. Owl is traditionally known as a bird of wisdom and as both a bird of good fortune and/or ill omen, but it is also a bird which has been ritually sacrificed. The Ancient Romans crucified owls to avert hail and thunder; and in Britain, until well into the nineteenth century, owls were nailed to barn doors for the same purpose.

The owl is the sixth bird to visit Adam, so it comes from Sephira 6, Tiphereth (Beauty). Tiphereth lies at the heart of the Cabbalistic Tree and it is the centre of equilibrium of

the whole Tree. Yet, because it is linked to all the other Sephiroth and, so, channels all their disparate energies, it is the most difficult Sephira to understand. Unusually, there are three Magical Images for Tiphereth: a magnificent king; A child; and a sacrificed god. They symbolize the harmonizing power of Tiphereth and its essential connection with birth and death.

Tiphereth is the place of transition and transmutation; the place where inner and outer consciousness touch; the centre where the still, small voice of the Spirit within us may be heard. It is directly connected to Kether and to the Source energies at the top of the Tree and it lies in the Sphere of the Sun. So, its power is the kingly power of the Sun, which may blind us or may bring direct illumination and insight into what lies, like a buried seed, beneath the rational, emotional, sensual persona which is our projected mask. It is a place where spiritual rebirth takes place and the Soul/Spirit enters human consciousness and either dies there in the prison of the body or is released by an act of self-sacrifice based on love and understanding.

All this is present in Ted's poem.

The number of Tiphereth is 6, the number of Venus, Goddess of Love. And the symbol of the powers of 6 is the hexagram, King Solomon's Seal, which is made of two interlaced triangles, the apex of one touching heaven and that of the other touching earth. Heaven and Earth, love and wisdom, body and soul are all laced together at Tiphereth and all energies are suspended, like the Owl in Ted's poem, in a stillness where "only the centre moves".

Ted's Owl links heaven and earth. As an ordinary bird, gliding silently over the dark hills hunting its prey, listening for signs of life, and bringing death to its victims, it is a "masked soul", its worldly body and needs masking the Divine Spirit within it. But it is also Ted's "Divine messenger" floating over the lower world of the Tree, listening for the awakening Spirit of Adam and ready to demonstrate to him the self-sacrifice which is necessary if he is to help restore the balance of Nature and re-unite the Female and Male Principles of God. This is 'The Great Work' of healing which is the 'Virtue' of Tiphereth.

Owl

Ted's Divine Owl demonstrates, first, the silence, the stillness and the attention which is needed if Adam is to hear that small voice of the Spirit within him. It "becalms deeper" the stillness of the trees and fields of the Earthly world, and its "two eyes", two golden orbs, look down from the "heart of heaven", just as Adam's two eyes must be raised from his position at Malkuth towards the heart of the Tree and the Sun of Tiphereth.

"Nothing is neglected, in the Owl's stare", just as nothing is neglected in the powers of Tiphereth. However, there is another, opposite meaning to this statement and, in the following eight lines of the poem, Ted's words and images trace the powerful magical symbol of a circle with the hexagram of Heaven and Earth inside it, and owl demonstrates what happens and what drastic remedy must be taken if the Divine

Source, the Zero, The Nothing, is neglected.

If Adam remains spiritually asleep, neglecting the work of recreating the original, undivided Zero, the No Thing, of wholeness and harmony, then the Female Principle, Nature, will be forever exiled in matter. So, in the worldly cycles of death and birth, “the womb” will open, “the cry” will come, but the Divine energies will remain trapped, becoming ever weaker and more dispersed, and “the shadow of the creature” – which is both the dark bodily shadow which masks the Divine Spirit within and the shadow of unilluminated being falling on the face of Nature – will forever “circumscribe” (encircle and limit) the “fate” of both.

Owl’s stare, like that of the Angelic ‘Watchers’ of the Sephiroth, encompasses all, past and present, and it sees this happen as it has happened so often before in the history of humankind. Owl’s response is a scream of horror and it proceeds to demonstrate its painful and complete rejection of the physical body and its limitations. Once “again”, as it has clearly done before, it rips off the “bandages” (the word suggests that the body is mere protection for a wounded Spirit), screaming in pain and horror “as if” such imprisonment “were inescapable”.

So, Owl becomes the sacrificed god which is one of the Magical Images of Tiphereth, sacrificing itself again to try and remove the shadow (which may also be sorrow) from the face of Nature, and, in so doing, demonstrating to Adam the painful self-sacrifice which must be made at Tiphereth if ever he is to complete his allotted task.

Adam, however, is still inert. So, having used his poetry to break up by force the imprisoning bodily form of owl in order to release the Spirit, in the final two lines of the poem Ted carefully brings the dualities together again to re-make the Earthly circle. At the same time, he creates from Heaven and Earth (capitalized to indicate their Divine, symbolic status), and “heaven” and “earth” (uncapitalized to indicate their ordinary worldly status) the magical hexagram which weaves all the energies together. In a mutual, painful devouring, Heaven and Earth become totally and inextricably part of each other, like the entwined triangles of the hexagram. And, in the final line of the poem, “earth eats” as the ordinary barn owl eats its prey, and “heaven is eaten” as the Divine spark of life in that prey dies.

Predator and prey, Earthly and Divine, body and Spirit, all are inextricably interwoven in our world, and the cycle of death and rebirth continues here on our ordinary “earth” and under our ordinary “heaven”. So, in this final line, the earthly circle of Nature in which Adam and we still live is re-established and a base is created at Malkuth (like the base of the triangle in the hexagram which reaches its apex towards Heaven) from which to reach the magical, transformative powers of Tiphereth which lie above it.

‘The Dove Came’ (THCP 449)

Dove

Now, “a gentle dove” comes to Adam, “forcing herself through all opposition”³⁶. She is

the seventh bird and she is the most domesticated of all the birds to visit Adam. She comes from Sephira 7, Netzach (Victory, Endurance, Eternity), which lies at the bottom of the Pillar of Force, where the number 7 combines the 3 of the Sacred Triangle at the top of the Tree with the 4 of the elements from which our world is made. It represents the coming together within our world of the Divine and the human, heaven and earth, male and female and it encompasses the promise of the enduring presence of the Divine Spirit within us and in our world. Netzach lies in the Planetary Sphere of Venus-Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, and 7 is the presiding number of Nature, which is the realm of the Goddess in all her aspects.

So, the dove comes to Adam seven times before alighting and “nesting her rainbows” of Divine promise in the “dense body of thorns” which is the unenlightened human body³⁷. In this way she reiterates the seven steps which, in the traditions of mystical ritual and iconography, the Initiate of the Mysteries must successfully negotiate before enlightenment is possible. More specifically, Ted’s imagery recalls that of Alchemical manuscripts in which the purifying Mercurial Spirit is represented by a dove which must descend seven times into the base ‘dense matter’ in the alchemical alembic before the pure rainbow colours of the ‘Peacock’s tail’ herald transmutation to pure Spiritual gold.

Dove Alchemy

At Netzach, the dove has even less freedom of movement than the birds from Chesed and Chokmah above her, but she still mirrors their dynamic energy.

Unlike the Owl of Tiphereth, which can enter and strip off form at will, the dove’s energies are form-bound. She is, as she is in Hebrew and Christian Biblical lore, the incarnated Holy Spirit. And her image in religious, mythical, Alchemical and Cabbalistic iconography represents the Divine Spirit, the Grace of God, innocence and purity.

At Malkuth, contemplation of our worldly iconography is the nearest some of us will come to understanding and knowing the Divine. Only those willing to make the sacrifices which are necessary on the Spiritual Quest will discover and release the Divine Spirit from within us and, so, progress further up the Tree. Nevertheless, Divine iconography, when it has been created with skill, understanding and love, can stir us emotionally and instinctively, thus linking our Spirit with the Divine, unmanifest, Source. The energies of Netzach encompass the flow and return of love which Divine iconography can permit. But the polarity of Netzach’s Venus, who is a Moon Goddess with a dark as well as a bright side, ensures that love, at Sephira 7, is eternally linked to sacrifice.

The dove’s task is to enter Adam’s heart and inspire in him all the emotional, instinctive, selfless and driven responses of pure love. However, in spite of her Divine, iconic status, and sometimes because of it, the dove has for centuries been sacrificed in sacred rituals and bred as food for human consumption. Her homing instinct, and the very feats of endurance which keep her coming back to Adam, are also exploited for our own worldly purposes³⁸.

Ted's dove, as both a Divine messenger and an ordinary bird, reflects all these things. Her breast is "big with rainbows", as if pregnant with Divine promise. Her wings "clapped lightning", which, like the many-rayed, rainbow-coloured Source lightning at Netzach, she "scattered like twigs"; but the sound is also the realistic clap of a dove's wings as it comes to roost. The soft, brooding, coo-cooing thunder of her voice promises both rain and storm, fertilization and destruction. And the "silver and violet" of the "piling heaven", whilst realistically describing the strange light and colour of a stormy sky, also suggests the iconographic silver of heavenly purity and violet, which is not only the seventh colour of the rainbow – the colour midway between the blue of Heaven and the red of Earth – but is also the colour of the vestments which, in both religious and magical ritual, are worn to symbolize the imminence of both sacrifice and rebirth³⁹.

Five times, in Ted's poem, the dove comes to Adam and is abused or rejected. Three times she is knocked down; twice she offers herself as sacrifice and her breast, symbol of nourishment and maternal care, is eaten, and "the milk of her blood" is drunk⁴⁰.

When she comes for the sixth time, "through all opposition", her sacrifice becomes Adam's, too. Her energies, now, are "sun-blinding" and deafening, for him and for her. She is the disembowelled bird which he tastes, and his tongue, like hers, struggles to express the Spirit of love and devotion which now "stirs like a heart". Language is no longer possible: instinct, love, emotion, all the energies of Netzach, must suffice as a guide to understanding the heart. And this is the lesson which Adam must learn from the dove.

Through this mutual sacrifice and suffering, the 'Victory' of Netzach is achieved. The Spirit is incarnated. Adam and the bird, Heaven and Earth, are united.

"Now", at last, in her seventh manifestation in Ted's poem, the dove alights, and in the double meaning of his word "alit", she not only comes to rest but also radiates light. In the "soft thunder" of her voice and the promise of "her rainbows", she "nests" in the "dense body of thorns" which is the body of Adam and, also, the 'thorny' body of words on the printed page. So, in the final three lines of Ted's poem⁴¹, both Adam and we see a 'Vision of Beauty Triumphant', which is the Spiritual Experience of Netzach.

'The Crow came to Adam' (THCP 449)

Crow

The Crow, which figured large in Ted's poetry and in his life, is the eighth bird to visit Adam and, so, comes from Sephira 8, Hod (Splendour, Glory, Honour).

Hod, at the bottom of the Pillar of Form, balances the energies of Netzach which lies opposite to it on the Pillar of Force. Its energies, like those of Netzach, link human and Divine but the link is made through the head not through the heart. Like Mercury, in whose Sphere it lies, Hod's energies are those of the intellect, abstract reasoning, communication, language and music – all the energies associated with the creative arts, plus (importantly and appropriately) the energies of the inner voice which, like

Mercury/Hermes, is the guide to our Spirit/Soul.

The number of both Hod and Mercury is 8, which like the intertwined snakes of Mercury's Caduceus, symbolizes the constantly circulating energies of Nature, and also figuratively links the Zero/Nothing of the Heavenly Source with the Uroborus of Nature's circling energies on the Earth below. 8 is 'The Gateway to Infinity'. And, importantly for Cabbalists, the eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Chet, symbolizes dynamic life, the continuous 'run and return' of energy between the higher levels of consciousness where lie the Mysteries of the Soul, and the worldly levels of everyday existence.

Mercury, like Crow in myth and folk-tale, is the messenger of the gods. He is the 'Teller of Truth' and he moves constantly between the human world and the Divine, but he does not always tell the whole truth, and so, like the Crow, he is known as a Trickster.

Crows, too, are tellers of tales and they have long had a special place in human superstition, story, myth and folk-tale. Like their fellow corvid, the Raven, they are associated with the Great Triple Goddess of Nature (as with the Celtic Goddess, Morrighu), and with legendary heroes, like the Irish Cu Chulain and the British king/god, Bran. They speak in the ear of the hero, just as Hugin and Munin spoke in the ear of Odin, bringing news of all that they have heard and seen in the world. And they speak prophecy. But their news must be carefully assessed by the hearer, who must use judgment and discretion to see beyond the initial form of the news and penetrate the mask of illusion in order to get to the inner Truth.

Nigredo

For every hero, on every spiritual journey, through every battle which must be fought, Crow's Truths, whether heard as an inner guiding voice or a voice in our ear, must be judged and evaluated, sifted and tested. This is a continuous process; and it is a process of separating the pure from the dross, the Alchemical Gold from Base Matter. So, in Alchemy, the Crow (or Raven) "which flies without wings into the blackness of night and the holiness of day"⁴² represents the Nigredo, the blackness which is part of the necessary process of purification.

In Ted's poem, Crow comes to us, as he comes to Adam, with news, but we must use our heads to interpret it.

Crow, displaying the characteristic curiosity and cheek of his species, lifts Adam's eyelid, physically ensuring that a glimmer of light enters his consciousness; and he whispers "in his ear". Perhaps it is the 'Vision of Splendour' which the dove of Netzach brought to him that Adam glimpses when his eyelid is lifted (lifting the lid beautifully suggests discovery and enlightenment). Perhaps the Crow's "love whispers" are the love-whispers of the Goddess, Nature, whose work Adam must undertake. Perhaps, too, the "news" Crow brings is news of heroic deeds and the possible 'Glory' of Hod, which he may achieve. But who has understood these love-whispers, what is this news, and what does it mean? Here is the riddle which Adam and we must unravel.

Here at Malkuth, in the ordinary, everyday world, Adam must struggle to discover the true meaning of Crow's news. We, reading these poems, know from the theme of the whole sequence of Adam and the Sacred Nine, and from Ted's own comments on it, that this is a spiritual challenge, but to understand it we, like Adam, must first be awake and alert.

In the last line of this brief and cryptic poem (the line's importance emphasized by its isolation) Crow achieves what all the other birds have attempted to do: stirred by Crow's physical assault, by his "love-whispers", and by his intellectual challenge, finally, "Adam woke". And the spiritual nature of his awakening is made clear by the appearance, now, of the Phoenix.

'And the Phoenix has come' (THCP 450)

Phoenix

The Phoenix, as Ted noted in the Introduction to his BBC reading of some of the poems from Adam and the Sacred Nine, is not an ordinary bird⁴³. Its legendary existence is common to Greek, Egyptian, Oriental and Christian lore, but its nature is purely mythological and symbolic. It is a fire-bird; and, traditionally, its appearance marks the emergence from the body of the human Spirit/Soul.

The Greeks seem to have taken their stories of the Phoenix from the Egyptians, whose 'Bennu bird', was sacred to the Sun God, Ra⁴⁴. They believed that it was self-created from fire or from the heart of Osiris and, every 500 to 1000 years, it flew from Arabia to the Sun Temple at Heliopolis, where on a spice-and-sulphur-strewn altar it burned itself to ashes. After three days a small, perfect phoenix emerged from the ashes to return to Arabia, signifying that the Earth had once more been renewed, re-created by the power of the Sun. In China, the Phoenix, the 'Feng Huang', comes from Paradise to perform extraordinary works and to help the development of Humankind. Phoenix And in Christian, Mystical and Alchemical iconography, it represents the fiery rebirth, from the ashes of the corruptible body, of the pure, incorruptible, immortal Spirit "by which all sublunary things are refreshed"⁴⁵. The Phoenix is a symbol of transmutation and re-birth.

Ted's Phoenix comes to Adam from the ninth Sephira, Yesod (Foundation), which lies directly above Malkuth on the Central Pillar of Balance. Yesod governs human evolution and redemption. It is connected directly to Tiphereth and thus, because it lies in the Sphere of the Moon, it links Moon energies with those of the Sun of Tiphereth. Through Tiphereth, Yesod is linked to Kether and the Divine Source at the top of the Tree. It is also connected by energy pathways to every other Sephira on the Tree and is the receptacle of all their emanations. Its number, 9, which contains all other numbers (1 to 9), reflects this cumulative power.

Malkuth, where Adam lies, is immediately below Yesod on the Tree and is unconnected with any other Sephira, except though Yesod which, therefore, acts as an interface. Only through Yesod can the energies which produce change and transformation reach

our world. Because of this, and because it lies in the Sphere of the Moon, Cabbalists regard Yesod as the most magical and the most powerful of all the Sephiroth.

In an early manuscript note, Ted wrote that the Phoenix “worships the dove of the world”, thus linking it with the Divine Spirit: and, through 9, Cabbalists believe that humankind discovers and unfolds the inner Divine Self, and the Spirit is then released. Yesod is the place of transmutation: and the Phoenix, is a symbol of transmutation.

Ted’s Phoenix, in the first lines of the poem, is present only as a voice. This voice (the voice, like the earlier song, is pure vibration, pure energy) heralds potential change. It is a sharp sword of light in the barren desert, a “glittering” in the “valley of dew”, a flaming across the “dusty sky” and a burning, melting agent in the “rich heap” of the stony mountains. It exists in the Fire, Water, Air and Earth of the material world of Malkuth. And it is heard, like the “Cock-Crows” which herald the dawn in Remains of Elmet (THCP 491)⁴⁶, in the barren, sunken, dusty and hard world of Adam. At the same time, Ted’s imagery suggests the potential transmutation of Adam’s and our own, unawakened, spiritually barren but changeable state.

This potential is embodied in the deliberate ambiguities which Ted built into the lines from “Its feathers shake...” onwards. By the use of the impersonal “the” Ted encompasses both the Phoenix and Adam. So, “the eye” from which “its feathers” are shaken may belong to the Phoenix, or Adam or both. “Its ashes” may “smoke from the breath” of either; and the “Flesh” which “trembles” may, equally, be its own or Adam’s. The phoenix, in feathers of fire and in the smoke of its breath, sacrifices itself, and from the ashes of its own flesh the new Phoenix is born. Equally, Adam, if he accepts the Divine Fire which the Phoenix offers, must die to his old existence; must symbolically sacrifice his fleshly ambitions and existence so that his Spiritual Self may be “newborn”. So, both the Phoenix and Adam are “the altar” of their own “death and rebirth”. And “where” the Phoenix “descends” – which may be the spice-strewn altar of tradition or, here, to the body of Adam – “Where it offers itself up”, this rebirth is possible.

Phoenix

Ultimately, Adam must choose, of his own free will, whether or not he is willing to accept the Divine Fire of the Phoenix, acknowledge the Divine Spark within his body, and, so, begin the difficult task to which he is being called. Like the shaman, he can accept that call and become part of the ‘Machinery of the Universe’, which is the Spiritual Vision of Yesod. Or he can reject it and die spiritually.

The nature of the task to which he is called, too, is represented in the energies of Yesod, where the potential for rebirth in our world is perpetually possible in the marriage of the Queenly, female, Moon-energies of Yesod, with the Kingly, male, Sun-energies of Tiphereth above it. This is the recombination of Female and Male essences from which “heavens on earth” – harmony and wholeness on Earth – may grow and through which the reunion of the Female Principle, Nature, with the Male Principle at Kether may eventually be achieved. The Hebrew letter of Yesod, Teth – ‘The Concealed Good’ – also symbolizes in its form the union of bride and groom, consummation with

conception, and pregnancy. And this is essentially a worldly pregnancy – the potential birth of the Divine Spirit which lies enwombed in the human body. If Adam chooses to accept the Divine Fire of the Phoenix and to follow its selfless example, then birth will take place and the “newborn” Spirit/Soul will “laugh in the blaze”.

Adam’s acceptance, however, will only be the start of the journey which he must make here on Earth. This is the first dawning of light; the beginning of consciousness of something more than the needs of the body and personal desires; the beginning of awareness of some dimension beyond what he knows through his five senses.

At Malkuth (the Gate) Adam will have taken his first conscious and independent decision and, thus, experienced the first stirrings of self-knowledge and will-power. This birth of new awareness, this first dawning of light, is beautifully captured in the next poem in this sequence, ‘Light’, which was included in the Rainbow Press edition of Adam and the Sacred Nine together with ‘Bud-tipped twig’. Neither of these poems appeared in the sequence published in Moortown.

‘Light’ (THCP 450-1) and ‘Bud-tipped twig’ (THCP 451)

‘Light’ and ‘Bud-tipped twig’ both have complex Cabbalistic meaning beyond the more obvious mystical interpretations which derive from images of enlightenment and of child-like innocence, and the suggestions of nourishment which are associated (although more problematically) with ‘breast’ and ‘nipple’.

In ‘Bud-tipped twig’ in particular, the nourishment seems not to be sought by the new Adam, but, tentatively, by Nature. Nor is it forthcoming. Only with reference to Cabbala does the meaning of both poems become clear, which is perhaps why they appeared only in the Limited Edition Rainbow Press publication.

In both poems, the lack of pronouns with words like ‘Light’, ‘Eyes’, ‘nipple’ and ‘breast’ is unusual but it allows these things to be both real and symbolic, specific and universal. It allows them, too, to embrace spiritual and, in particular, Cabbalistic metaphor.

“Light”, which “eased open” Adam’s eyes as he lay, still prone, on the Earth at Malkuth, is something we all take for granted. Yet, without the physical reflection of the light of the Sun from every atom of matter in our world, and without the response such reflection generates in the visual cortex of our brains, we would see nothing at all. Without the presence of light, too, life could not and would not exist.

The metaphor in Cabbala which equates the light of the Sun with the Divine Source, is precise. The first emanation of Divine Light at Kether at the moment of Creation, immediately divides into Universal Form and Universal Force (represented by the two sides of the Cabbalistic tree), and the interaction of these two essences as they descend the Tree gives rise to Matter, to all living things; and, in Adam, to will, memory and the inner Sun of the Divine Spirit. Without that Spiritual light, we cannot see the true nature of our world and (as in a world without Sun) we will live in darkness, have no

spiritual nourishment and no potential for growth and renewal. There will be nothing for us beyond mortality and death.

As well as the Divine Light which reaches us by passing from Sephira to Sephira down the Tree, there is also, as in Ted's poem, "light's bridge", by means of which we may be spiritually enlightened and reborn. It runs directly down the Middle Pillar of the Tree from the Ain Soph (the infinite Divine Source) through Kether to Tiphereth at the heart of the Tree, then, mediated by Yesod, to Adam (and us) at Malkuth. So, Divine Light may be directly revealed to us through the powers of Yesod and we, also, may look upwards through Yesod, as Ted's Adam did, and glimpse the whole Tree in its glory. For this reason, Malkuth is called the 'Resplendent Intelligence', meaning 'Knowledge of the Divine Light'. The 'Spiritual Experience' of Malkuth, too, is 'Vision of the Holy Guardian Angel', or 'Communication with the Holy Guardian Angel': and our Guardian Angel is the voice within us to which, as Ted's Owl demonstrated to Adam, we must listen if we are to be guided towards the Divine Light.

In the poem 'Light', Adam's eyes (and ours, too, since 'eyes' is used generically), opened by "light", show the true glory of the natural world. Leaves blossom, and "light's bridge" is seen leading from leaf to leaf on the Tree "upward and back" to the limit: to every "last leaf" and to "the least vein of the least flower-leaf". And Light seems "to smile".

"Eyes" are "childish" with joy but still "uncertain" of this newly revealed vision of their world. They test "each semblance" (Ted's precise choice of words reflects the way every familiar thing now looks subtly different). And four times, since every material thing in our world of Malkuth is made of the four Elements, Light "smiled". It is as if, as in William Blake's 'Fourfold vision', eyes have been given a glimpse of the "immense world of delight" which is normally closed to us by our "senses five": We have glimpsed the Truth, not the illusory world which we create around us based on the information we receive from our senses, and we see, as Blake puts it, "with, not thro' the Eye"⁴⁷.

As with any sudden, unexpected revelation of Truth, everything appears so clear and simple that it is hard to comprehend why we have not seen it before. Eyes, still unused to seeing things in this way are suddenly "Afraid that this was all there was to it". And, of course, this is not all there is to it. "Human kind", as Eliot said, "Cannot bear very much reality"⁴⁸. If Adam steps into this world unprepared, naïve and unprotected (as he currently is), he will be taking the first step on the path of the traditional hero and facing the same dangers. Eyes do well to be afraid: even if, for the moment, it is only because their customary, comfortable view of the world has been challenged by one which is totally new and unfamiliar.

Light, which "eased eyes open", has shown Adam that the ordinary evidence of his senses can be questioned, but he does not yet have faith in this new vision. In this uncertain state, he is in the process of passing from one state of being to another. He is still subject to the fluid, mediating, magical energies of Yesod, the 'Receptacle of Emanations' and Yesod will be the channel by which any future development will take

place. It is possible, now, for that to happen, so, in 'Bud-tipped twig', Adam is Cabbalistically tested .

Adam's newly awakened Spirit, in order to grow, must break out of the purely animal and vegetable state of being at Malkuth and must negotiate the tricky initiation posed by the triangle of energies which circulate between Yesod, Hod and Netzach. Only when this is accomplished, can he safely cross the Threshold to Tiphereth; and this he must do if he is to be able to use all these energies effectively in the healing task to which he is called.

It is tempting to picture the inverted triangle made on the Tree by the Sephiroth Yesod, Hod and Netzach, as the breast and nipples of Adam in Ted's poem. But whether or not Ted had this in mind, his choice of "breast" and "nipple", rather than the more traditionally accepted seat of the Spirit/Soul, the heart, beautifully conveys the nurturing relationship which must be established between Adam and the Female Principle which exists in Nature.

Breast and nipple are powerful symbols of nourishment, protection and consolation. They are the interface (skin) between our inner and outer worlds; the source of life for the newborn infant and, also, for the newborn Spirit. The image of the human god-hero at his mother's breast is ancient and widespread in religious and spiritual iconography: so, too, is the positioning of hands close to the breast in prayer or supplication when asking the gods for nurture and protection. Aurora Surgeons Yet more pertinent here, however, is the Gnostic and Cabbalistic image of the Goddess as Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom, nurturing her human children at her breast. One such image, in the 15th century illuminated manuscript, Aurora Consurgens, attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas (with whose work Ted was familiar)⁴⁹, shows Sophia as the red-faced Aurora, whose presence signifies the end of the "night of unknowing" and rebirth from the Nigredo of worldly corruption into the world of spiritual light. She suckles her children (here shown as mature men) with her "virgin milk", feeding and nourishing the Divine Spirit within them .⁵⁰

Nature provides for us through our mother's milk and through her bounty, but only in Cabbala does humankind have the reciprocal task of nourishing and caring for the Divine Female Principle in Nature which is our Spiritual Mother. And not every human being is ready or able to do this.

In 'Bud-tipped twig', there is new hope and the potential of renewal for both Adam and Nature, but without appropriate nourishment no bud will open, no seeds in the grass-plume will germinate and all "green-tender" shoots will wither and die. So Nature tests Adam.

At one nipple, the Mercurial energies of Hod, rational and communicative, find no response, and the Tree retreats "aloof still wintery" .

The emotional, unfixed energies of Netzach, too, stroke tentatively across a nipple and,

finding no response, flee “queerly far off” out of Adam’s ordinary world.

And the energies of Yesod, which reach down the central column of the Tree into the roots and brambles of the dark world of Malkuth, claw “by chance” at the breast before springing off unchecked to resume “quietly” their “otherworldly” existence.

Clouds, which in Cabbalistic tradition are not only the veils of illusion which obscure the upper (godly) levels of the Tree from our ordinary vision but also symbolize the veil beyond which the Mother Goddess deliberately conceals her Mysteries from those who are not ready or worthy to receive them, tumble like “godly beds” between the Sun of Tiphereth and Adam. They are not fixed; yet, realistically and metaphorically, they draw “a vast coldness / Over the breast”.

Meanwhile, Yesod, the single interface between Heaven and Earth, ordinary and Divine, is “preoccupied”. It is “the sea”, a place of moons and tides, and it transmits a sea of energies to our Earth, our sun and our moon. Its Sphere is the Aether, a Cabbalistic fifth Element, through which the energies travel in waves according to Divinely created cosmic laws; and its energies stir the human unconscious, and bring dreams and magical power. Yesod’s ‘Virtue’ is ‘Independence’, and , in lines 13-15 of Ted’s poem, which mark a transition between Adam’s unresponsive state and his first instinctive turning towards the Sun, it displays this by being wholly “preoccupied” with its own role and its “own substance and the laws of waves”.

“Breast”, which realistically is “unable to see / Or to hear / Or to cry”, is also metaphorically the seat of the instincts, feelings and emotions which are governed by Yesod. The coldness it feels when the sun is obscured is also both real and metaphorical, for the sun is the source of heat and life for both body and Spirit. But it is Yesod’s independence and indifference which sway the emotions and “make the breast feel lost”, so that instinctively, as if guided by some deep inner knowledge, it lifts its simple (non rational) “face” (its unformed face-like surface) towards the original source of all sustenance, the sun.

So, Adam is at last pushed into action. And the Cabbalistic significance of Ted’s description of him now as “the first beggar” is twofold.

Beggar

Firstly, a beggar has nothing: he humbly begs for sustenance and he trusts that it will be provided. He has, therefore, three attributes which are necessary for any human who is about to begin a spiritual journey: a lack of worldly encumbrances, humility and trust.

Secondly, there is a specific Cabbalistic and Mystical image, derived from the Tarot51, which links The Beggar with the beginning of the spiritual journey, the number zero, and the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph, which is linked to the first moment of creation. In Tarot, The Beggar is more frequently depicted as The Fool, and in The Painted Caravan: a penetration into the secrets of the tarot cards, a copy of which was owned by Sylvia Plath and would have been familiar to Ted, the Beggar/Fool is

described as “the everyman who must journey forward whether he will or no”. He is “heedless”, “blind”, “unthinking”⁵². The Beggar is also childlike, naive, a vagabond who lives outside the normal social order, and he is connected to his physical environment only by his emotions and his will to survive. His number, 0, is the Soul-Egg, the symbol of the beginning and the end, All and Nothing, potential and completion, and the Cabbalistic Zero which symbolizes “the source of all things”⁵³.

Adam at the end of ‘Bud-tipped twig’, is in the zero state which Eliot describes so beautifully in Four Quartets as “deprivation / And destitution of all property, / Desiccation of the world of sense, / Evacuation of the world of fancy”. He is at the entrance of the Yesodic tunnel which, like the shaman’s entrance to the Otherworld, will connect him to a world where he will be as helpless as a newborn child entering a completely new and totally unfamiliar country.

‘The sole of the foot’ (THCP 451-2)

The beautiful simplicity of this final poem in the sequence, belies the depth of meaning which lies behind each carefully chosen word.

Adam stands, the sole of his foot “tough-skinned”, “comfortable”, on the “rock-surface” of the cradle-grave over which “The Song” poured in the very first poem. And the “host”, which he was urged not to disappoint in ‘Awake’, are “gladdened” by his action. In spite of the break between lines 9 and 10, the lack of punctuation between “the first host, greeting it, gladden” and “With even gentle squeeze” suggests a reciprocal greeting between foot and rock, Adam and Nature, which is appropriate. But since “host” can be singular or plural, the Heavenly Host of angels and archangels, the birds and all created things (which in Genesis 2:1 are called “the host”), may also be intended.

This is Adam’s first acquaintance with Nature, the beginning of his getting to know her. And in the “star-blaze” reminder of the fiery formation of our Earth from the cosmic dust, we again hear echoes of the “star-broken stone” of ‘Where The Mothers’ in Remains of Elmet⁵⁴ where the four Elements, the Alchemical Mothers, “gallop their Souls” and “a happiness secret and wild” begins.

Yet, this is not all. In the final lines of the poem, Adam communicates with Nature physically and emotionally, body and Spirit. Most importantly, he acknowledges, by the most powerful, creative and magical means at his disposal – words - the role he is now to play. “I was made”, he says (and the space between this line and the next allows his statement to stand alone as his recognition of the roles of both Nature and the Divine Creator in his existence): More than this, “I was made”, he now acknowledges, “For you”. So, Adam’s commitment to both the Female Principle, Nature and the Male Creative Principle of God is spoken, and in the printed poem, written down for all to see.

Thus, Cabbalistically, Adam’s inner Self and his outer bodily self are united. He becomes an upright figure – I – the affirmative, aware, whole Self: and also a single number – 1 – which represents the complete Cabbalistic Man – Adam Kadmon.

United now, through Yesod (9), with all the energies of the Tree, the completion which is both the end and the beginning, symbolized by 10, is achieved. And it is achieved in the real world of Malkuth, where Adam must live and work and where, for Cabbalists, all changes must begin.

In his letter to Keith Sagar (23 April 1980), Ted wrote that “the whole drift” of Adam and the Sacred Nine was to alchemize “a phoenix out of a serpent: An awakened life out of an unawakened”. Now, in this final poem of the sequence, in the paronomasia of ‘sole’ and ‘soul’ in title/first line, the spiritual significance of Adam’s first, willed action is conveyed.

In history, myth and religion, the sole of the foot, feet and footprints have long been of special importance. The “human map” begins with the first hominids, like those who left their footprints to harden in the volcanic ash of the Olduvai area in Africa; it continues in the myths of god-heroes whose only humanly vulnerable parts were their ankles and feet; and it exists in the folk-tales of the evil power of the Devil’s footprints and in stories like that of Good King Wenceslas, whose snowy footprints transmitted life-preserving warmth to his young page. It exists, still, in the reverence shown for the footprints of Mohammed in the El Aksa Mosque on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem; in the footprints of Buddha; and in the intention of Christians to follow in the footprints of Christ.

Traditionally, enlightenment comes through the sole of the foot. It is significant, too, that the first footprint marks the first step on any human journey, physical or spiritual.

Here in Ted’s poem, Adam’s “first acquaintance” with world-rock is linked to the “star-blaze” creation of our Earth, to the “first host” which in Genesis 2:1 were finished together “with the heavens and the earth” on the sixth day of the Biblical Creation; and to Adam’s first speech, which in Cabbalistic legend marks the stage at which the newly created Adam changes from an unformed mass into a fully formed human being⁵⁵.

More than this, however, is the importance (especially in Jewish Cabbala) of the number 10, the numeral which symbolically combines the pillar of 1 – representing the Self, and the Male, Creative Principle – with the circle 0, which represents All and Nothing, Nature, the Feminine Creative Principle. The number 10 is symbolically linked with the word and with the secret power which Cabbalists attribute to the spoken word here on Earth. This, they believe, mirrors the creative power of the Divine Creator who, as the Bible tells, “said let there be light: and there was light” (Genesis:13) and then named all else and, so, brought it into existence.

In this final poem of Adam and the Sacred Nine, Ted brings the Cabbalistic journey of the sequence full circle. The energies have all been gathered at Malkuth; Adam stands in the first moments of this new world’s existence; and on the final page of The Rainbow Press edition, opposite Ted’s poem, Baskin’s Phoenix rises triumphant from the flames. So, too, the snake, the Uroborus, eats its tail, and the end becomes the beginning.

For Adam and for Ted, both of whom have undergone this poetic Cabbalistic journey, a new creative beginning is now possible, and it is marked by words of humility, understanding and commitment. Importantly, too, Ted's final words acknowledge that it is in this world, not on some other, transcendental plane, that he and Adam (and we) must undertake whatever healing spiritual work is necessary. It is here that we must live and work. Here we will find the sacred life energies within and around us, embedded in Nature, of which we are a part. We neglect or abuse Nature at our peril.

Most importantly, at the end of this Cabbalistic journey, Adam and Ted have pledged allegiance to the Female Principle and they are ready to devote their lives to her cause. Ted's own commitment, in words and deeds, was evident in his lifelong support of ecological causes and, of course, in the dedication, care and skill with which he constantly sought to channel healing energies into our world through his words.

Snake

REFERENCES AND NOTES

34. Ted Hughes' mss. note, transcribed and quoted in an e-mail to me by Keith Sagar, 22 Feb. 2009.

35. Ted's introduction to this poem in his BBC Radio 3 reading of some of the poems, given on 17 May 1980.

36. Ted Hughes' mss. note, transcribed and quoted in an e-mail to me by Keith Sagar, 22 Feb. 2009.

37. Lines 1 (the title), 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 15.

38. The theme of Leonard Cohen's song, 'Anthem', relies on general awareness of the continual sacrifices the dove makes for us. The song offers a Buddhist koan as a suggestion of hope against the ills of this world in which the Holy Dove is continually bought and sold and "is never free". I'm Your Man , Lionsgate CD. Recorded 2004-5.

39. In the Christian Church, violet vestments are worn at Advent and on Ash Wednesday during Lent.

40. Sagar notes that "doves are unique in being the only birds to feed their young on milk, a high protein fluid called 'crop-milk'". The Laughter of Foxes, Liverpool University Press, 2000. p. 92.

41. 3 is the number of the Mother Goddess, Binah.

42. Roob, Op. cit. 'Rosarium Philosophorum'. p.360.

43. Ted's introduction to the BBC Radio 3 reading of some of the poems, given on 17

May 1980. This reading is available on the British Library CD, The Spoken Work: Ted Hughes, NSACD 54-55, 2008.

Bennu

44. Xoan Abeleira, a Spanish artist/poet whose translations of a selection of Ted Hughes' poems, *El azor en el paramo*, were published by Bartleby Editores in March 2010, has created beautifully evocative pictures of the Bennu Bird. He sent these to me, completely unaware that I was at the time writing about Ted's Phoenix poem.

45. Becher, *Oedipus chimicus*, 1664. Roob, Op. cit. p. 356.

46. The cock-crows in this later poem herald an alchemical "kindling" of light in a dark world of Elmet, and they accumulate until they boil over in a fiery, "magic soft mixture" which momentarily recreates the whole land.

47. Blake, W. 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', Plate 7E. See Erdman, D.V. *The Illuminated Blake*, Anchor Books, USA, p. 104. and 'The Everlasting Gospel', line 100. William Blake, *Everyman's Library*, Dent, 1970. p.350.

48. Eliot, T.S. 'Burnt Norton' 1"42-3, *Four Quartets*, Faber, 1972. p.14.

49. In his Introduction to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Ted writes of the stairway or ladder as a traditional memory map and of St. Thomas Aquinas as "the patron saint of memory maps", whose dispensation "Man cannot understand without images" was central to Catholic spiritual cosmology. *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. op.cit. p.20.

50. Roob. op.cit. pp. 238-9.

51. Tarot Cards are sometimes used by Cabbalists as a mnemonic device depicting the stages of the spiritual journey. The Beggar appears in the Mantegna Pack which dates from 1460, and it has been found in a few other early Tarot packs.

52. Rakoczi, B.I. *The Painted Caravan*, Boucher, The Hague, Holland, 1954. p. 27.

53. Crowley, A. *The Book of Thoth*, Samuel Weisser, York Beach, Maine. 1985. p.53.

54. 'Where the Mothers', *Remains of Elmet*, Faber, 1979. p.10. 'Abel Cross, Crimsworth Dene', *THCP* pp. 455-6.

55. Gershom Scholem quotes a Talmudic passage which describes this process in detail. Scholem, G. Op.cit. p. 161.

Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama, text and illustrations © Ann Skea 2010. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalAdam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama. Part 3.
'And Owl', 'The Dove Came', 'The Crow came to Adam', 'And the Phoenix has come',
'Light', 'Bud-tipped twig', 'The sole of the foot'.

© Ann Skea

All page references (THCP) are to Ted Hughes Collected Poems, Faber, 2003.
'And Owl' (THCP 448-9)

Owl

"And Owl" comes. "Owl who remembers everything"³⁴. Owl, specifically "a barn-owl"³⁵, with its white, ghostly mask and silent flight, is a creature of the night in the English countryside but also, in mythology, a bird sacred to Athene, Goddess of war, wisdom, music and craft, and to Hecate and Lilith, Moon Goddesses of magic and death. Owl is traditionally known as a bird of wisdom and as both a bird of good fortune and/or ill omen, but it is also a bird which has been ritually sacrificed. The Ancient Romans crucified owls to avert hail and thunder; and in Britain, until well into the nineteenth century, owls were nailed to barn doors for the same purpose.

The owl is the sixth bird to visit Adam, so it comes from Sephira 6, Tiphereth (Beauty). Tiphereth lies at the heart of the Cabbalistic Tree and it is the centre of equilibrium of the whole Tree. Yet, because it is linked to all the other Sephiroth and, so, channels all their disparate energies, it is the most difficult Sephira to understand. Unusually, there are three Magical Images for Tiphereth: a magnificent king; A child; and a sacrificed god. They symbolize the harmonizing power of Tiphereth and its essential connection with birth and death.

Tiphereth is the place of transition and transmutation; the place where inner and outer consciousness touch; the centre where the still, small voice of the Spirit within us may be heard. It is directly connected to Kether and to the Source energies at the top of the Tree and it lies in the Sphere of the Sun. So, its power is the kingly power of the Sun, which may blind us or may bring direct illumination and insight into what lies, like a buried seed, beneath the rational, emotional, sensual persona which is our projected mask. It is a place where spiritual rebirth takes place and the Soul/Spirit enters human consciousness and either dies there in the prison of the body or is released by an act of self-sacrifice based on love and understanding.

All this is present in Ted's poem.

The number of Tiphereth is 6, the number of Venus, Goddess of Love. And the symbol of the powers of 6 is the hexagram, King Solomon's Seal, which is made of two interlaced triangles, the apex of one touching heaven and that of the other touching earth. Heaven and Earth, love and wisdom, body and soul are all laced together at

Tiphereth and all energies are suspended, like the Owl in Ted's poem, in a stillness where "only the centre moves".

Ted's Owl links heaven and earth. As an ordinary bird, gliding silently over the dark hills hunting its prey, listening for signs of life, and bringing death to its victims, it is a "masked soul", its worldly body and needs masking the Divine Spirit within it. But it is also Ted's "Divine messenger" floating over the lower world of the Tree, listening for the awakening Spirit of Adam and ready to demonstrate to him the self-sacrifice which is necessary if he is to help restore the balance of Nature and re-unite the Female and Male Principles of God. This is 'The Great Work' of healing which is the 'Virtue' of Tiphereth.

Owl

Ted's Divine Owl demonstrates, first, the silence, the stillness and the attention which is needed if Adam is to hear that small voice of the Spirit within him. It "becalms deeper" the stillness of the trees and fields of the Earthly world, and its "two eyes", two golden orbs, look down from the "heart of heaven", just as Adam's two eyes must be raised from his position at Malkuth towards the heart of the Tree and the Sun of Tiphereth.

"Nothing is neglected, in the Owl's stare", just as nothing is neglected in the powers of Tiphereth. However, there is another, opposite meaning to this statement and, in the following eight lines of the poem, Ted's words and images trace the powerful magical symbol of a circle with the hexagram of Heaven and Earth inside it, and owl demonstrates what happens and what drastic remedy must be taken if the Divine Source, the Zero, The Nothing, is neglected.

If Adam remains spiritually asleep, neglecting the work of recreating the original, undivided Zero, the No Thing, of wholeness and harmony, then the Female Principle, Nature, will be forever exiled in matter. So, in the worldly cycles of death and birth, "the womb" will open, "the cry" will come, but the Divine energies will remain trapped, becoming ever weaker and more dispersed, and "the shadow of the creature" – which is both the dark bodily shadow which masks the Divine Spirit within and the shadow of unilluminated being falling on the face of Nature – will forever "circumscribe" (encircle and limit) the "fate" of both.

Owl's stare, like that of the Angelic 'Watchers' of the Sephiroth, encompasses all, past and present, and it sees this happen as it has happened so often before in the history of humankind. Owl's response is a scream of horror and it proceeds to demonstrate its painful and complete rejection of the physical body and its limitations. Once "again", as it has clearly done before, it rips off the "bandages" (the word suggests that the body is mere protection for a wounded Spirit), screaming in pain and horror "as if" such imprisonment "were inescapable".

So, Owl becomes the sacrificed god which is one of the Magical Images of Tiphereth, sacrificing itself again to try and remove the shadow (which may also be sorrow) from the face of Nature, and, in so doing, demonstrating to Adam the painful self-sacrifice

which must be made at Tiphereth if ever he is to complete his allotted task.

Adam, however, is still inert. So, having used his poetry to break up by force the imprisoning bodily form of owl in order to release the Spirit, in the final two lines of the poem Ted carefully brings the dualities together again to re-make the Earthly circle. At the same time, he creates from Heaven and Earth (capitalized to indicate their Divine, symbolic status), and “heaven” and “earth” (uncapitalized to indicate their ordinary worldly status) the magical hexagram which weaves all the energies together. In a mutual, painful devouring, Heaven and Earth become totally and inextricably part of each other, like the entwined triangles of the hexagram. And, in the final line of the poem, “earth eats” as the ordinary barn owl eats its prey, and “heaven is eaten” as the Divine spark of life in that prey dies.

Predator and prey, Earthly and Divine, body and Spirit, all are inextricably interwoven in our world, and the cycle of death and rebirth continues here on our ordinary “earth” and under our ordinary “heaven”. So, in this final line, the earthly circle of Nature in which Adam and we still live is re-established and a base is created at Malkuth (like the base of the triangle in the hexagram which reaches its apex towards Heaven) from which to reach the magical, transformative powers of Tiphereth which lie above it.

‘The Dove Came’ (THCP 449)

Dove

Now, “a gentle dove” comes to Adam, “forcing herself through all opposition”³⁶. She is the seventh bird and she is the most domesticated of all the birds to visit Adam. She comes from Sephira 7, Netzach (Victory, Endurance, Eternity), which lies at the bottom of the Pillar of Force, where the number 7 combines the 3 of the Sacred Triangle at the top of the Tree with the 4 of the elements from which our world is made. It represents the coming together within our world of the Divine and the human, heaven and earth, male and female and it encompasses the promise of the enduring presence of the Divine Spirit within us and in our world. Netzach lies in the Planetary Sphere of Venus-Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, and 7 is the presiding number of Nature, which is the realm of the Goddess in all her aspects.

So, the dove comes to Adam seven times before alighting and “nesting her rainbows” of Divine promise in the “dense body of thorns” which is the unenlightened human body³⁷. In this way she reiterates the seven steps which, in the traditions of mystical ritual and iconography, the Initiate of the Mysteries must successfully negotiate before enlightenment is possible. More specifically, Ted’s imagery recalls that of Alchemical manuscripts in which the purifying Mercurial Spirit is represented by a dove which must descend seven times into the base ‘dense matter’ in the alchemical alembic before the pure rainbow colours of the ‘Peacock’s tail’ herald transmutation to pure Spiritual gold.

Dove Alchemy

At Netzach, the dove has even less freedom of movement than the birds from Chesed and Chokmah above her, but she still mirrors their dynamic energy.

Unlike the Owl of Tiphereth, which can enter and strip off form at will, the dove's energies are form-bound. She is, as she is in Hebrew and Christian Biblical lore, the incarnated Holy Spirit. And her image in religious, mythical, Alchemical and Cabbalistic iconography represents the Divine Spirit, the Grace of God, innocence and purity.

At Malkuth, contemplation of our worldly iconography is the nearest some of us will come to understanding and knowing the Divine. Only those willing to make the sacrifices which are necessary on the Spiritual Quest will discover and release the Divine Spirit from within us and, so, progress further up the Tree. Nevertheless, Divine iconography, when it has been created with skill, understanding and love, can stir us emotionally and instinctively, thus linking our Spirit with the Divine, unmanifest, Source. The energies of Netzach encompass the flow and return of love which Divine iconography can permit. But the polarity of Netzach's Venus, who is a Moon Goddess with a dark as well as a bright side, ensures that love, at Sephira 7, is eternally linked to sacrifice.

The dove's task is to enter Adam's heart and inspire in him all the emotional, instinctive, selfless and driven responses of pure love. However, in spite of her Divine, iconic status, and sometimes because of it, the dove has for centuries been sacrificed in sacred rituals and bred as food for human consumption. Her homing instinct, and the very feats of endurance which keep her coming back to Adam, are also exploited for our own worldly purposes³⁸.

Ted's dove, as both a Divine messenger and an ordinary bird, reflects all these things. Her breast is "big with rainbows", as if pregnant with Divine promise. Her wings "clapped lightning", which, like the many-rayed, rainbow-coloured Source lightning at Netzach, she "scattered like twigs"; but the sound is also the realistic clap of a dove's wings as it comes to roost. The soft, brooding, coo-cooing thunder of her voice promises both rain and storm, fertilization and destruction. And the "silver and violet" of the "piling heaven", whilst realistically describing the strange light and colour of a stormy sky, also suggests the iconographic silver of heavenly purity and violet, which is not only the seventh colour of the rainbow – the colour midway between the blue of Heaven and the red of Earth – but is also the colour of the vestments which, in both religious and magical ritual, are worn to symbolize the imminence of both sacrifice and rebirth³⁹.

Five times, in Ted's poem, the dove comes to Adam and is abused or rejected. Three times she is knocked down; twice she offers herself as sacrifice and her breast, symbol of nourishment and maternal care, is eaten, and "the milk of her blood" is drunk⁴⁰.

When she comes for the sixth time, "through all opposition", her sacrifice becomes Adam's, too. Her energies, now, are "sun-blinding" and deafening, for him and for her. She is the disembowelled bird which he tastes, and his tongue, like hers, struggles to express the Spirit of love and devotion which now "stirs like a heart". Language is no longer possible: instinct, love, emotion, all the energies of Netzach, must suffice as a guide to understanding the heart. And this is the lesson which Adam must learn from

the dove.

Through this mutual sacrifice and suffering, the 'Victory' of Netzach is achieved. The Spirit is incarnated. Adam and the bird, Heaven and Earth, are united.

"Now", at last, in her seventh manifestation in Ted's poem, the dove alights, and in the double meaning of his word "alit", she not only comes to rest but also radiates light. In the "soft thunder" of her voice and the promise of "her rainbows", she "nests" in the "dense body of thorns" which is the body of Adam and, also, the 'thorny' body of words on the printed page. So, in the final three lines of Ted's poem⁴¹, both Adam and we see a 'Vision of Beauty Triumphant', which is the Spiritual Experience of Netzach.

'The Crow came to Adam' (THCP 449)

Crow

The Crow, which figured large in Ted's poetry and in his life, is the eighth bird to visit Adam and, so, comes from Sephira 8, Hod (Splendour, Glory, Honour).

Hod, at the bottom of the Pillar of Form, balances the energies of Netzach which lies opposite to it on the Pillar of Force. Its energies, like those of Netzach, link human and Divine but the link is made through the head not through the heart. Like Mercury, in whose Sphere it lies, Hod's energies are those of the intellect, abstract reasoning, communication, language and music – all the energies associated with the creative arts, plus (importantly and appropriately) the energies of the inner voice which, like Mercury/Hermes, is the guide to our Spirit/Soul.

The number of both Hod and Mercury is 8, which like the intertwined snakes of Mercury's Caduceus, symbolizes the constantly circulating energies of Nature, and also figuratively links the Zero/Nothing of the Heavenly Source with the Uroborus of Nature's circling energies on the Earth below. 8 is 'The Gateway to Infinity'. And, importantly for Cabbalists, the eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Chet, symbolizes dynamic life, the continuous 'run and return' of energy between the higher levels of consciousness where lie the Mysteries of the Soul, and the worldly levels of everyday existence.

Mercury, like Crow in myth and folk-tale, is the messenger of the gods. He is the 'Teller of Truth' and he moves constantly between the human world and the Divine, but he does not always tell the whole truth, and so, like the Crow, he is known as a Trickster.

Crows, too, are tellers of tales and they have long had a special place in human superstition, story, myth and folk-tale. Like their fellow corvid, the Raven, they are associated with the Great Triple Goddess of Nature (as with the Celtic Goddess, Morrighu), and with legendary heroes, like the Irish Cu Chulain and the British king/god, Bran. They speak in the ear of the hero, just as Hugin and Munin spoke in the ear of Odin, bringing news of all that they have heard and seen in the world. And they speak prophecy. But their news must be carefully assessed by the hearer, who must use judgment and discretion to see beyond the initial form of the news and penetrate the

mask of illusion in order to get to the inner Truth.

Nigredo

For every hero, on every spiritual journey, through every battle which must be fought, Crow's Truths, whether heard as an inner guiding voice or a voice in our ear, must be judged and evaluated, sifted and tested. This is a continuous process; and it is a process of separating the pure from the dross, the Alchemical Gold from Base Matter. So, in Alchemy, the Crow (or Raven) "which flies without wings into the blackness of night and the holiness of day"⁴² represents the Nigredo, the blackness which is part of the necessary process of purification.

In Ted's poem, Crow comes to us, as he comes to Adam, with news, but we must use our heads to interpret it.

Crow, displaying the characteristic curiosity and cheek of his species, lifts Adam's eyelid, physically ensuring that a glimmer of light enters his consciousness; and he whispers "in his ear". Perhaps it is the 'Vision of Splendour' which the dove of Netzach brought to him that Adam glimpses when his eyelid is lifted (lifting the lid beautifully suggests discovery and enlightenment). Perhaps the Crow's "love whispers" are the love-whispers of the Goddess, Nature, whose work Adam must undertake. Perhaps, too, the "news" Crow brings is news of heroic deeds and the possible 'Glory' of Hod, which he may achieve. But who has understood these love-whispers, what is this news, and what does it mean? Here is the riddle which Adam and we must unravel.

Here at Malkuth, in the ordinary, everyday world, Adam must struggle to discover the true meaning of Crow's news. We, reading these poems, know from the theme of the whole sequence of Adam and the Sacred Nine, and from Ted's own comments on it, that this is a spiritual challenge, but to understand it we, like Adam, must first be awake and alert.

In the last line of this brief and cryptic poem (the line's importance emphasized by its isolation) Crow achieves what all the other birds have attempted to do: stirred by Crow's physical assault, by his "love-whispers", and by his intellectual challenge, finally, "Adam woke". And the spiritual nature of his awakening is made clear by the appearance, now, of the Phoenix.

'And the Phoenix has come' (THCP 450)

Phoenix

The Phoenix, as Ted noted in the Introduction to his BBC reading of some of the poems from Adam and the Sacred Nine, is not an ordinary bird⁴³. Its legendary existence is common to Greek, Egyptian, Oriental and Christian lore, but its nature is purely mythological and symbolic. It is a fire-bird; and, traditionally, its appearance marks the emergence from the body of the human Spirit/Soul.

The Greeks seem to have taken their stories of the Phoenix from the Egyptians, whose

'Bennu bird', was sacred to the Sun God, Ra⁴⁴. They believed that it was self-created from fire or from the heart of Osiris and, every 500 to 1000 years, it flew from Arabia to the Sun Temple at Heliopolis, where on a spice-and-sulphur-strewn altar it burned itself to ashes. After three days a small, perfect phoenix emerged from the ashes to return to Arabia, signifying that the Earth had once more been renewed, re-created by the power of the Sun. In China, the Phoenix, the 'Feng Huang', comes from Paradise to perform extraordinary works and to help the development of Humankind. Phoenix And in Christian, Mystical and Alchemical iconography, it represents the fiery rebirth, from the ashes of the corruptible body, of the pure, incorruptible, immortal Spirit "by which all sublunary things are refreshed"⁴⁵. The Phoenix is a symbol of transmutation and re-birth.

Ted's Phoenix comes to Adam from the ninth Sephira, Yesod (Foundation), which lies directly above Malkuth on the Central Pillar of Balance. Yesod governs human evolution and redemption. It is connected directly to Tiphereth and thus, because it lies in the Sphere of the Moon, it links Moon energies with those of the Sun of Tiphereth. Through Tiphereth, Yesod is linked to Kether and the Divine Source at the top of the Tree. It is also connected by energy pathways to every other Sephira on the Tree and is the receptacle of all their emanations. Its number, 9, which contains all other numbers (1 to 9), reflects this cumulative power.

Malkuth, where Adam lies, is immediately below Yesod on the Tree and is unconnected with any other Sephira, except though Yesod which, therefore, acts as an interface. Only through Yesod can the energies which produce change and transformation reach our world. Because of this, and because it lies in the Sphere of the Moon, Cabbalists regard Yesod as the most magical and the most powerful of all the Sephiroth.

In an early manuscript note, Ted wrote that the Phoenix "worships the dove of the world", thus linking it with the Divine Spirit: and, through 9, Cabbalist believe that humankind discovers and unfolds the inner Divine Self, and the Spirit is then released. Yesod is the place of transmutation: and the Phoenix, is a symbol of transmutation.

Ted's Phoenix, in the first lines of the poem, is present only as a voice. This voice (the voice, like the earlier song, is pure vibration, pure energy) heralds potential change. It is a sharp sword of light in the barren desert, a "glittering" in the "valley of dew", a flaming across the "dusty sky" and a burning, melting agent in the "rich heap" of the stony mountains. It exists in the Fire, Water, Air and Earth of the material world of Malkuth. And it is heard, like the "Cock-Crows" which herald the dawn in Remains of Elmet (THCP 491)⁴⁶, in the barren, sunken, dusty and hard world of Adam. At the same time, Ted's imagery suggests the potential transmutation of Adam's and our own, unawakened, spiritually barren but changeable state.

This potential is embodied in the deliberate ambiguities which Ted built into the lines from "Its feathers shake..." onwards. By the use of the impersonal "the" Ted encompasses both the Phoenix and Adam. So, "the eye" from which "its feathers" are shaken may belong to the Phoenix, or Adam or both. "Its ashes" may "smoke from the

breath” of either; and the “Flesh” which “trembles” may, equally, be its own or Adam’s. The phoenix, in feathers of fire and in the smoke of its breath, sacrifices itself, and from the ashes of its own flesh the new Phoenix is born. Equally, Adam, if he accepts the Divine Fire which the Phoenix offers, must die to his old existence; must symbolically sacrifice his fleshly ambitions and existence so that his Spiritual Self may be “newborn”. So, both the Phoenix and Adam are “the altar” of their own “death and rebirth”. And “where” the Phoenix “descends” – which may be the spice-strewn altar of tradition or, here, to the body of Adam – “Where it offers itself up”, this rebirth is possible.

Phoenix

Ultimately, Adam must choose, of his own free will, whether or not he is willing to accept the Divine Fire of the Phoenix, acknowledge the Divine Spark within his body, and, so, begin the difficult task to which he is being called. Like the shaman, he can accept that call and become part of the ‘Machinery of the Universe’, which is the Spiritual Vision of Yesod. Or he can reject it and die spiritually.

The nature of the task to which he is called, too, is represented in the energies of Yesod, where the potential for rebirth in our world is perpetually possible in the marriage of the Queenly, female, Moon-energies of Yesod, with the Kingly, male, Sun-energies of Tiphereth above it. This is the recombination of Female and Male essences from which “heavens on earth” – harmony and wholeness on Earth – may grow and through which the reunion of the Female Principle, Nature, with the Male Principle at Kether may eventually be achieved. The Hebrew letter of Yesod, Teth – ‘The Concealed Good’ – also symbolizes in its form the union of bride and groom, consummation with conception, and pregnancy. And this is essentially a worldly pregnancy – the potential birth of the Divine Spirit which lies enwombed in the human body. If Adam chooses to accept the Divine Fire of the Phoenix and to follow its selfless example, then birth will take place and the “newborn” Spirit/Soul will “laugh in the blaze”.

Adam’s acceptance, however, will only be the start of the journey which he must make here on Earth. This is the first dawning of light; the beginning of consciousness of something more than the needs of the body and personal desires; the beginning of awareness of some dimension beyond what he knows through his five senses.

At Malkuth (the Gate) Adam will have taken his first conscious and independent decision and, thus, experienced the first stirrings of self-knowledge and will-power. This birth of new awareness, this first dawning of light, is beautifully captured in the next poem in this sequence, ‘Light’, which was included in the Rainbow Press edition of Adam and the Sacred Nine together with ‘Bud-tipped twig’. Neither of these poems appeared in the sequence published in Moortown.

‘Light’ (THCP 450-1) and ‘Bud-tipped twig’ (THCP 451)

‘Light’ and ‘Bud-tipped twig’ both have complex Cabbalistic meaning beyond the more obvious mystical interpretations which derive from images of enlightenment and of child-like innocence, and the suggestions of nourishment which are associated

(although more problematically) with 'breast' and 'nipple'.

In 'Bud-tipped twig' in particular, the nourishment seems not to be sought by the new Adam, but, tentatively, by Nature. Nor is it forthcoming. Only with reference to Cabbala does the meaning of both poems become clear, which is perhaps why they appeared only in the Limited Edition Rainbow Press publication.

In both poems, the lack of pronouns with words like 'Light', 'Eyes', 'nipple' and 'breast' is unusual but it allows these things to be both real and symbolic, specific and universal. It allows them, too, to embrace spiritual and, in particular, Cabbalistic metaphor.

"Light", which "eased open" Adam's eyes as he lay, still prone, on the Earth at Malkuth, is something we all take for granted. Yet, without the physical reflection of the light of the Sun from every atom of matter in our world, and without the response such reflection generates in the visual cortex of our brains, we would see nothing at all. Without the presence of light, too, life could not and would not exist.

The metaphor in Cabbala which equates the light of the Sun with the Divine Source, is precise. The first emanation of Divine Light at Kether at the moment of Creation, immediately divides into Universal Form and Universal Force (represented by the two sides of the Cabbalistic tree), and the interaction of these two essences as they descend the Tree gives rise to Matter, to all living things; and, in Adam, to will, memory and the inner Sun of the Divine Spirit. Without that Spiritual light, we cannot see the true nature of our world and (as in a world without Sun) we will live in darkness, have no spiritual nourishment and no potential for growth and renewal. There will be nothing for us beyond mortality and death.

As well as the Divine Light which reaches us by passing from Sephira to Sephira down the Tree, there is also, as in Ted's poem, "light's bridge", by means of which we may be spiritually enlightened and reborn. It runs directly down the Middle Pillar of the Tree from the Ain Soph (the infinite Divine Source) through Kether to Tiphereth at the heart of the Tree, then, mediated by Yesod, to Adam (and us) at Malkuth. So, Divine Light may be directly revealed to us through the powers of Yesod and we, also, may look upwards through Yesod, as Ted's Adam did, and glimpse the whole Tree in its glory. For this reason, Malkuth is called the 'Resplendent Intelligence', meaning 'Knowledge of the Divine Light'. The 'Spiritual Experience' of Malkuth, too, is 'Vision of the Holy Guardian Angel', or 'Communication with the Holy Guardian Angel': and our Guardian Angel is the voice within us to which, as Ted's Owl demonstrated to Adam, we must listen if we are to be guided towards the Divine Light.

In the poem 'Light', Adam's eyes (and ours, too, since 'eyes' is used generically), opened by "light", show the true glory of the natural world. Leaves blossom, and "light's bridge" is seen leading from leaf to leaf on the Tree "upward and back" to the limit: to every "last leaf" and to "the least vein of the least flower-leaf". And Light seems "to smile".

“Eyes” are “childish” with joy but still “uncertain” of this newly revealed vision of their world. They test “each semblance” (Ted’s precise choice of words reflects the way every familiar thing now looks subtly different). And four times, since every material thing in our world of Malkuth is made of the four Elements, Light “smiled”. It is as if, as in William Blake’s ‘Fourfold vision’, eyes have been given a glimpse of the “immense world of delight” which is normally closed to us by our “senses five”: We have glimpsed the Truth, not the illusory world which we create around us based on the information we receive from our senses, and we see, as Blake puts it, “with, not thro’ the Eye”⁴⁷.

As with any sudden, unexpected revelation of Truth, everything appears so clear and simple that it is hard to comprehend why we have not seen it before. Eyes, still unused to seeing things in this way are suddenly “Afraid that this was all there was to it”. And, of course, this is not all there is to it. “Human kind”, as Eliot said, “Cannot bear very much reality”⁴⁸. If Adam steps into this world unprepared, naïve and unprotected (as he currently is), he will be taking the first step on the path of the traditional hero and facing the same dangers. Eyes do well to be afraid: even if, for the moment, it is only because their customary, comfortable view of the world has been challenged by one which is totally new and unfamiliar.

Light, which “eased eyes open”, has shown Adam that the ordinary evidence of his senses can be questioned, but he does not yet have faith in this new vision. In this uncertain state, he is in the process of passing from one state of being to another. He is still subject to the fluid, mediating, magical energies of Yesod, the ‘Receptacle of Emanations’ and Yesod will be the channel by which any future development will take place. It is possible, now, for that to happen, so, in ‘Bud-tipped twig’, Adam is Cabbalistically tested .

Adam’s newly awakened Spirit, in order to grow, must break out of the purely animal and vegetable state of being at Malkuth and must negotiate the tricky initiation posed by the triangle of energies which circulate between Yesod, Hod and Netzach. Only when this is accomplished, can he safely cross the Threshold to Tiphereth; and this he must do if he is to be able to use all these energies effectively in the healing task to which he is called.

It is tempting to picture the inverted triangle made on the Tree by the Sephiroth Yesod, Hod and Netzach, as the breast and nipples of Adam in Ted’s poem. But whether or not Ted had this in mind, his choice of “breast” and “nipple”, rather than the more traditionally accepted seat of the Spirit/Soul, the heart, beautifully conveys the nurturing relationship which must be established between Adam and the Female Principle which exists in Nature.

Breast and nipple are powerful symbols of nourishment, protection and consolation. They are the interface (skin) between our inner and outer worlds; the source of life for the newborn infant and, also, for the newborn Spirit. The image of the human god-hero at his mother’s breast is ancient and widespread in religious and spiritual iconography: so, too, is the positioning of hands close to the breast in prayer or supplication when

asking the gods for nurture and protection. Aurora Surgeons Yet more pertinent here, however, is the Gnostic and Cabbalistic image of the Goddess as Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom, nurturing her human children at her breast. One such image, in the 15th century illuminated manuscript, Aurora Consurgens, attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas (with whose work Ted was familiar)⁴⁹, shows Sophia as the red-faced Aurora, whose presence signifies the end of the “night of unknowing” and rebirth from the Nigredo of worldly corruption into the world of spiritual light. She suckles her children (here shown as mature men) with her “virgin milk”, feeding and nourishing the Divine Spirit within them .50

Nature provides for us through our mother’s milk and through her bounty, but only in Cabbala does humankind have the reciprocal task of nourishing and caring for the Divine Female Principle in Nature which is our Spiritual Mother. And not every human being is ready or able to do this.

In ‘Bud-tipped twig’, there is new hope and the potential of renewal for both Adam and Nature, but without appropriate nourishment no bud will open, no seeds in the grass-plume will germinate and all “green-tender” shoots will wither and die. So Nature tests Adam.

At one nipple, the Mercurial energies of Hod, rational and communicative, find no response, and the Tree retreats “aloof still wintery” .

The emotional, unfixed energies of Netzach, too, stroke tentatively across a nipple and, finding no response, flee “queerly far off” out of Adam’s ordinary world.

And the energies of Yesod, which reach down the central column of the Tree into the roots and brambles of the dark world of Malkuth, claw “by chance” at the breast before springing off unchecked to resume “quietly” their “otherworldly” existence.

Clouds, which in Cabbalistic tradition are not only the veils of illusion which obscure the upper (godly) levels of the Tree from our ordinary vision but also symbolize the veil beyond which the Mother Goddess deliberately conceals her Mysteries from those who are not ready or worthy to receive them, tumble like “godly beds” between the Sun of Tiphereth and Adam. They are not fixed; yet, realistically and metaphorically, they draw “a vast coldness / Over the breast”.

Meanwhile, Yesod, the single interface between Heaven and Earth, ordinary and Divine, is “preoccupied”. It is “the sea”, a place of moons and tides, and it transmits a sea of energies to our Earth, our sun and our moon. Its Sphere is the Aether, a Cabbalistic fifth Element, through which the energies travel in waves according to Divinely created cosmic laws; and its energies stir the human unconscious, and bring dreams and magical power. Yesod’s ‘Virtue’ is ‘Independence’, and , in lines 13-15 of Ted’s poem, which mark a transition between Adam’s unresponsive state and his first instinctive turning towards the Sun, it displays this by being wholly “preoccupied” with its own role and its “own substance and the laws of waves”.

“Breast”, which realistically is “unable to see / Or to hear / Or to cry”, is also metaphorically the seat of the instincts, feelings and emotions which are governed by Yesod. The coldness it feels when the sun is obscured is also both real and metaphorical, for the sun is the source of heat and life for both body and Spirit. But it is Yesod’s independence and indifference which sway the emotions and “make the breast feel lost”, so that instinctively, as if guided by some deep inner knowledge, it lifts its simple (non rational) “face” (its unformed face-like surface) towards the original source of all sustenance, the sun.

So, Adam is at last pushed into action. And the Cabbalistic significance of Ted’s description of him now as “the first beggar” is twofold.

Beggar

Firstly, a beggar has nothing: he humbly begs for sustenance and he trusts that it will be provided. He has, therefore, three attributes which are necessary for any human who is about to begin a spiritual journey: a lack of worldly encumbrances, humility and trust.

Secondly, there is a specific Cabbalistic and Mystical image, derived from the Tarot⁵¹, which links The Beggar with the beginning of the spiritual journey, the number zero, and the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph, which is linked to the first moment of creation. In Tarot, The Beggar is more frequently depicted as The Fool, and in The Painted Caravan: a penetration into the secrets of the tarot cards, a copy of which was owned by Sylvia Plath and would have been familiar to Ted, the Beggar/Fool is described as “the everyman who must journey forward whether he will or no”. He is “heedless”, “blind”, “unthinking”⁵². The Beggar is also childlike, naive, a vagabond who lives outside the normal social order, and he is connected to his physical environment only by his emotions and his will to survive. His number, 0, is the Soul-Egg, the symbol of the beginning and the end, All and Nothing, potential and completion, and the Cabbalistic Zero which symbolizes “the source of all things”⁵³.

Adam at the end of ‘Bud-tipped twig’, is in the zero state which Eliot describes so beautifully in Four Quartets as “deprivation / And destitution of all property, / Desiccation of the world of sense, / Evacuation of the world of fancy”. He is at the entrance of the Yesodic tunnel which, like the shaman’s entrance to the Otherworld, will connect him to a world where he will be as helpless as a newborn child entering a completely new and totally unfamiliar country.

‘The sole of the foot’ (THCP 451-2)

The beautiful simplicity of this final poem in the sequence, belies the depth of meaning which lies behind each carefully chosen word.

Adam stands, the sole of his foot “tough-skinned”, “comfortable”, on the “rock-surface” of the cradle-grave over which “The Song” poured in the very first poem. And the “host”, which he was urged not to disappoint in ‘Awake’, are “gladdened” by his action. In spite

of the break between lines 9 and 10, the lack of punctuation between “the first host, greeting it, gladden” and “With even gentle squeeze” suggests a reciprocal greeting between foot and rock, Adam and Nature, which is appropriate. But since “host” can be singular or plural, the Heavenly Host of angels and archangels, the birds and all created things (which in Genesis 2:1 are called “the host”), may also be intended.

This is Adam’s first acquaintance with Nature, the beginning of his getting to know her. And in the “star-blaze” reminder of the fiery formation of our Earth from the cosmic dust, we again hear echoes of the “star-broken stone” of ‘Where The Mothers’ in Remains of Elmet⁵⁴ where the four Elements, the Alchemical Mothers, “gallop their Souls” and “a happiness secret and wild” begins.

Yet, this is not all. In the final lines of the poem, Adam communicates with Nature physically and emotionally, body and Spirit. Most importantly, he acknowledges, by the most powerful, creative and magical means at his disposal – words - the role he is now to play. “I was made”, he says (and the space between this line and the next allows his statement to stand alone as his recognition of the roles of both Nature and the Divine Creator in his existence): More than this, “I was made”, he now acknowledges, “For you”. So, Adam’s commitment to both the Female Principle, Nature and the Male Creative Principle of God is spoken, and in the printed poem, written down for all to see.

Thus, Cabbalistically, Adam’s inner Self and his outer bodily self are united. He becomes an upright figure – I – the affirmative, aware, whole Self: and also a single number – 1 – which represents the complete Cabbalistic Man – Adam Kadmon.

United now, through Yesod (9), with all the energies of the Tree, the completion which is both the end and the beginning, symbolized by 10, is achieved. And it is achieved in the real world of Malkuth, where Adam must live and work and where, for Cabbalists, all changes must begin.

In his letter to Keith Sagar (23 April 1980), Ted wrote that “the whole drift” of Adam and the Sacred Nine was to alchemize “a phoenix out of a serpent: An awakened life out of an unawakened”. Now, in this final poem of the sequence, in the paronomasia of ‘sole’ and ‘soul’ in title/first line, the spiritual significance of Adam’s first, willed action is conveyed.

In history, myth and religion, the sole of the foot, feet and footprints have long been of special importance. The “human map” begins with the first hominids, like those who left their footprints to harden in the volcanic ash of the Olduvai area in Africa; it continues in the myths of god-heroes whose only humanly vulnerable parts were their ankles and feet; and it exists in the folk-tales of the evil power of the Devil’s footprints and in stories like that of Good King Wenceslas, whose snowy footprints transmitted life-preserving warmth to his young page. It exists, still, in the reverence shown for the footprints of Mohammed in the El Aksa Mosque on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem; in the footprints of Buddha; and in the intention of Christians to follow in the footprints of Christ.

Traditionally, enlightenment comes through the sole of the foot. It is significant, too, that the first footprint marks the first step on any human journey, physical or spiritual.

Here in Ted's poem, Adam's "first acquaintance" with world-rock is linked to the "star-blaze" creation of our Earth, to the "first host" which in Genesis 2:1 were finished together "with the heavens and the earth" on the sixth day of the Biblical Creation; and to Adam's first speech, which in Cabbalistic legend marks the stage at which the newly created Adam changes from an unformed mass into a fully formed human being⁵⁵.

More than this, however, is the importance (especially in Jewish Cabbala) of the number 10, the numeral which symbolically combines the pillar of 1 – representing the Self, and the Male, Creative Principle – with the circle 0, which represents All and Nothing, Nature, the Feminine Creative Principle. The number 10 is symbolically linked with the word and with the secret power which Cabbalists attribute to the spoken word here on Earth. This, they believe, mirrors the creative power of the Divine Creator who, as the Bible tells, "said let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis:13) and then named all else and, so, brought it into existence.

In this final poem of Adam and the Sacred Nine, Ted brings the Cabbalistic journey of the sequence full circle. The energies have all been gathered at Malkuth; Adam stands in the first moments of this new world's existence; and on the final page of The Rainbow Press edition, opposite Ted's poem, Baskin's Phoenix rises triumphant from the flames. So, too, the snake, the Uroborus, eats its tail, and the end becomes the beginning.

For Adam and for Ted, both of whom have undergone this poetic Cabbalistic journey, a new creative beginning is now possible, and it is marked by words of humility, understanding and commitment. Importantly, too, Ted's final words acknowledge that it is in this world, not on some other, transcendental plane, that he and Adam (and we) must undertake whatever healing spiritual work is necessary. It is here that we must live and work. Here we will find the sacred life energies within and around us, embedded in Nature, of which we are a part. We neglect or abuse Nature at our peril.

Most importantly, at the end of this Cabbalistic journey, Adam and Ted have pledged allegiance to the Female Principle and they are ready to devote their lives to her cause. Ted's own commitment, in words and deeds, was evident in his lifelong support of ecological causes and, of course, in the dedication, care and skill with which he constantly sought to channel healing energies into our world through his words.

Snake

REFERENCES AND NOTES

34. Ted Hughes' mss. note, transcribed and quoted in an e-mail to me by Keith Sagar, 22 Feb. 2009.

35. Ted's introduction to this poem in his BBC Radio 3 reading of some of the poems,

given on 17 May 1980.

36. Ted Hughes' mss. note, transcribed and quoted in an e-mail to me by Keith Sagar, 22 Feb. 2009.

37. Lines 1 (the title), 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 15.

38. The theme of Leonard Cohen's song, 'Anthem', relies on general awareness of the continual sacrifices the dove makes for us. The song offers a Buddhist koan as a suggestion of hope against the ills of this world in which the Holy Dove is continually bought and sold and "is never free". I'm Your Man , Lionsgate CD. Recorded 2004-5.

39. In the Christian Church, violet vestments are worn at Advent and on Ash Wednesday during Lent.

40. Sagar notes that "doves are unique in being the only birds to feed their young on milk, a high protein fluid called 'crop-milk'". The Laughter of Foxes, Liverpool University Press, 2000. p. 92.

41. 3 is the number of the Mother Goddess, Binah.

42. Roob, Op. cit. 'Rosarium Philosophorum'. p.360.

43. Ted's introduction to the BBC Radio 3 reading of some of the poems, given on 17 May 1980. This reading is available on the British Library CD, The Spoken Work: Ted Hughes, NSACD 54-55, 2008.

Bennu

44. Xoan Abeleira, a Spanish artist/poet whose translations of a selection of Ted Hughes' poems, El azor en el paramo, were published by Bartleby Editores in March 2010, has created beautifully evocative pictures of the Bennu Bird. He sent these to me, completely unaware that I was at the time writing about Ted's Phoenix poem.

45. Becher, Oedipus chimicus, 1664. Roob, Op. cit. p. 356.

46. The cock-crows in this later poem herald an alchemical "kindling" of light in a dark world of Elmet, and they accumulate until they boil over in a fiery, "magic soft mixture" which momentarily recreates the whole land.

47. Blake, W. 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', Plate 7E. See Erdman, D.V. The Illuminated Blake, Anchor Books, USA, p. 104. and 'The Everlasting Gospel', line 100. William Blake, Everyman's Library, Dent, 1970. p.350.

48. Eliot, T.S. 'Burnt Norton' 1"42-3, Four Quartets, Faber, 1972. p.14.

49. In his Introduction to Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, Ted writes

of the stairway or ladder as a traditional memory map and of St. Thomas Aquinas as “the patron saint of memory maps”, whose dispensation “Man cannot understand without images” was central to Catholic spiritual cosmology. Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being. op.cit. p.20.

50. Roob. op.cit. pp. 238-9.

51. Tarot Cards are sometimes used by Cabbalists as a mnemonic device depicting the stages of the spiritual journey. The Beggar appears in the Mantegna Pack which dates from 1460, and it has been found in a few other early Tarot packs.

52. Rakoczi, B.I. The Painted Caravan, Boucher, The Hague, Holland, 1954. p. 27.

53. Crowley, A. The Book of Thoth, Samuel Weisser, York Beach, Maine. 1985. p.53.

54. ‘Where the Mothers’, Remains of Elmet, Faber, 1979. p.10. ‘Abel Cross, Crimsworth Dene’, THCP pp. 455-6.

55. Gershom Scholem quotes a Talmudic passage which describes this process in detail. Sholem, G. Op.cit. p. 161.

Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama, text and illustrations © Ann Skea 2010. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional
Translation Café Translation Café
Review of Contemporary Texts in Translation
No. 94/February 10, 2010

[Current Issue](#)

[No. 93](#)

[No. 92](#)

[About Translation Café](#)

[Authors' profiles](#)

[Translators, young authors](#)

[Archive](#)

[Links](#)

[Contemporary Literature Press](#)

[Contact Us](#)

ANN SKEA

[Major Ted Hughes scholar, Australia, <http://ann.skea.com/>]

OCCULT ENERGIES

In 1984 I was puzzling over Ted's description of *Cave Birds* as An Alchemical Cave Drama and I spent several weeks studying alchemical manuscripts in the British Library. I had only my meagre Latin, a brief early apprenticeship in pharmacy, and a copy of Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* to guide me, but it was enough for me to see that *Cave Birds* was a perfect alchemical text. There was the poetic, symbolic story-telling level: although the exotic peacocks, salamanders, doves and toads of the early alchemists had been replaced by Baskin's barnyard cockerels, owls, swifts, eagles and corvids – all (apart from the vulture of "The Interrogator") familiar birds of Ted's English-Celtic homeland. There, built into the working and reworking of the poems and in the structure of the sequence itself, was the practical, painstaking, step-by-step procedure of the alchemical synthesis. And underlying it all was the theme of spiritual cleansing and rebirth.

In its performance at the Ilkley Festival in Yorkshire in May 1975, *Cave Birds* must have seemed very like an old morality tale or one of the York Mystery Plays, a version of which Ted's sister, Olwyn, remembers seeing performed in a town near their home when they were children. Indeed, Ted's notes for the accompanying Ilkley Festival programme described it as "a mystery play of sorts."

I was so impressed by the alchemical synthesis Ted had achieved in *Cave Birds* that I did something I had never done before. I wrote to Ted, whom I had never met and who was not yet Poet Laureate, expressing my admiration for this work. He wrote back (in November 1984) a long letter in which he said very little about alchemy, but a great deal about "the two parallel stories" in *Cave Birds* [1]. One story, he said, described the judgment of Socrates, his "accusation, defence, conviction for murder, execution after expiatory sacrifice (the cockerel), passage to the underworld" and "resurrection as a Falcon." The other, was "a human scenario," in which a man and a woman represented phases of a male-female relationship.

The death of Socrates in Athens "as a sceptical philosopher, the patron saint of irony and dialectic reason" was, Ted wrote, his starting point. And Socrates's crime was "the murder of the Mediterranean Goddess (as Mother and Bride)."

He also mentioned the Bardo Thodol and the journey to the underworld. Socrates? Interpersonal relationships? The Bardo Thodol? As I got to know Ted better, I realized that this seeming obfuscation of the serious alchemical nature of his work by offering a number of different explanations for its origins was characteristic of his response to questions which touched on his deeper occult interests. It was not that he denied them. Nor that these other threads of inspiration and meaning were not also part of his work. It was more that like any serious worker with Alchemy, Cabbala, or any other so-called 'magic', he needed to judge the seriousness of the question, and the purpose and the state of understanding of the questioner.

Alchemy, Ted wrote to me later, when he knew me better, was "a little outside current English Studies in England...In fact to the orthodoxy it is a kind of anathema – tabu". And in 1993, after reading more of what I had written about his use of Alchemy in *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River*[2], he wrote, "your approach is like mine. Our only difficulty is – who else shares out approach?" Back in 1984, however, Ted's response to my letter, and especially his comments about Socrates and the crime against the Mediterranean Goddess, puzzled me and made me read his work again from a different perspective.

Socrates, I found, had appeared in Ted's work before. In 'The Perfect Forms' in *Lupercal*, Ted's scorn for him is patent. Socrates, the great teacher who might have helped Man towards wholeness and understanding, instead demonstrated "the undying tail-swinging/ Stupidity of the donkey/ That carried Christ." So obsessed was he with our superior rational powers, that he taught that the instinctive, intuitive side of human nature must be rejected as a source of knowledge. Only rational, analytical debate could reveal Absolute Truth. In an essay which was published in 1976, Ted wrote that Socrates's way of leading his pupils to Truth through logical, step-by-step methods had resulted in "the Platonic system of ideas – a system which has in one way or another dominated the mental life of the Western world ever since." [3] This, in Ted's view, was Socrates's "crime." And this division of our nature into rational/irrational, objective/subjective, with the rejection of everything intuitive and instinctive (all those natural energies traditionally associated with the Goddess and the female) was something which Ted believed to be responsible for most human ills. "When something abandons Nature," he wrote in a review in 1970, "it has lost touch with its creator, and is called an evolutionary dead-end." [4]

No wonder Ted found it necessary to arraign Socrates for his seminal part in this process, to call him forth for judgment, and to subject him to a death and rebirth which would remake him "as the child and spouse of the Goddess." And through our imaginative participation in the poetic-alchemical ritual of this drama, he sought to heal and remake us, too.

Puzzling over Ted's reference to Socrates's crime led me, also, to William Blake, whose work I already knew to be deeply woven into Ted's being. Blake, too, had lambasted Socrates for forging the chains of reason which led to 'Analytics' and 'Science', 'Priests and Philosophers', and, ultimately, to the division of Body from Soul. Blake, too, had used poetic and occult rituals in an attempt to heal this division. And, as I re-read Blake, it became clear to me that Ted's Cave Birds was in many ways similar to Blake's most alchemical work, the sequence of annotated illustrations of The Book of Job. I traced these similarities with fascination, not knowing, until Olwyn Hughes told me later, that Ted had once hung copies of Blake's Job etchings above his desk.

I knew that Ted had told Ekbert Faas that Blake (and Beethoven) could be found as the deepest traces "at the bottom of my strata." And he identified Yeats, too, as an early guide, saying that he had come to Yeats's poetry through his "other interests, folklore and magic." [5] Like both Blake and Yeats, Ted had explored the spiritual heritage which was to be found in the literature of other cultures and earlier times, and had espoused beliefs and practices which were regarded with suspicion and derision by his contemporaries. And both Blake and Yeats were, in Ted's terms, shamanic poets who had been summoned by a spirit, had accepted the call, and had flown to the Source in order to come back with healing or prophetic energies. Ted, too, has been recognized as a shamanic poet, but his methods and his kinship with Blake and Yeats in magical belief and practice is less widely accepted.

Magic, for Ted was a deeply serious subject which included Hermetic lore, Alchemy, Cabbala and much else. Like Yeats's magic, as Ted described it in a letter to Keith Sagar, it encompassed "the whole of Eastern mystical philosophy, the whole tradition of Hermetic Magic (which is a good part of Jewish Mystical philosophy, not to speak of the mystical philosophy of the Renaissance), the whole historical exploration into spirit life at every level of consciousness, the whole deposit of earlier and other religion, myth, vision, traditional wisdom and story in folk belief." [6] And for Ted, magic had always been the work of poets and the purpose of poetry. "Magic," he once said, "is one way of making things happen the way you want them to happen"; and he noted that from the earliest "one-line chants of nonsense syllables in accompaniment to a stamping dance", poems had been power-charms, tools, "practical agents in the business of gaining desired ends." [7]

Ted was, and was not, open about his use of magic. His interest in astrology was well known, but it was regarded either as 'dotty' or (as I read most recently) as an "endearingly bonkers obsession." [8] To friends, he talked quite freely about occult energies. On my first visit to Devon, he told me of a friend who had become a healer and how this had helped him live with a painful, crippling disease. And he described the way a dowser had used a map and a pendulum to chart (accurately, as it turned out) the

course of three streams which met under the kitchen floor at Court Green. He urged me to try dowsing, and told me how to make wire dowsing rods and how to use them. "You can even do it with a bottle of water balanced on your hand," he said. "Lots of people can do it. But I'm no good at it."

Yet, when asked by Ekbert Faas about the sources of the meditation and invocation exercises that Sylvia had said he devised for her, he was dismissive: "The whole body of magical literature which anybody can look up. I'd prefer not to talk about it." [9]

To his close friend, Lucas Myers, he sent (in 1962) a copy of the magician Franz Bardon's *Initiation Into Hermetics*: a course of instructions of magical theory and practice. He also sent another friend a copy in about 1976, which suggests the lasting importance the exercises in this book had for him. But he and I talked only briefly about his use of Alchemy and never, directly, about Cabbala. I knew that Ted was superstitious. I understood, too, that he took very seriously the requirement that those who actively use magical techniques should obey the maxim: know, will, dare, and be silent. Silence was self-protection. Ted, having written about the fates of Occult NeoPlatonists like Giordano Bruno and John Dee, knew the dangers of breaking it. So, there was a tacit agreement between us that I would not probe him about certain subjects. However, I saw enough evidence in Ted's work (poetry and prose), in his references to books he had read and considered important, and, in oblique ways, in our conversations, to confirm my belief that poetry and magic (in its serious, sacred form) were inseparable in Ted's work.

When *Birthday Letters* was published, on the first of the two dates Ted had told me earlier that he had chosen according to the stars, I read it with Alchemy and Magic in mind. I saw it, initially, as Ted's *eroica furor* – an inspired sequence of love poems, such as the Renaissance Magus, Giordano Bruno, had created at the height of his powers, and embodying the same Hermetic NeoPlatonic healing purpose. At the time, I knew next to nothing about Cabbala, other than what I had read in Ted's essays on Shakespeare, and in Frances Yates's scholarly and fascinating books which I had once discussed briefly with Ted. Only later, after Ted's death, did a chance question about the number of poems in the published sequence lead me to think Cabbala might be involved.

I began, very sceptically, to lay out the poems as if they represented a Cabbalistic journey. Then, with Ted's poems as my guide, I began to learn about Cabbala. [10] The journey took me six years to complete, and I published each step of my examination of the poems on my web-site as I went. At every step, I expected to come to a poem which had no Cabbalistic significance at all or was in completely the wrong place on the journey. Slowly, however, I came to accept that if there were things about a poem that I did not understand; or if Ted had seemingly got the facts of an event wrong or put them

in the wrong chronological order, then there was some Cabbalistic insight or truth which I had not yet learned. Invariably, after I had done some further reading in books like Gershom Scholem's *On Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, or in Colin Low's *Notes On Kabbala* on his WebPages[11], or in a few other Cabbalistic texts, Ted's intentions became absolutely clear. I came to see that nothing about this sequence of poems was accidental: that as well as relying on his poetic intuition and his highly developed visual imagination, Ted had chosen every aspect of every poem with the utmost care and precision.

I was aware, constantly, of two dangers. Firstly, that in looking for patterns which fitted a Cabbalistic framework I might impose that pattern where it did not exist. Secondly, after being contacted by a Jewish man who had read the first steps of my journey on my web-site and who wrote accusing me of trespassing on sacred Jewish territory, I realized that my research into Cabbala might offend specific religious sensibilities.

The first danger, I discovered, was less likely than it seemed. Cabbala is a difficult and complex subject, yet it has such a precise framework that to fit a specific poem from *Birthday Letters* to a particular Path requires a great deal of knowledge, skill, hard work and ingenuity. To make every aspect of every poem fit a Path in the correct sequence would certainly be beyond my limited Cabbalistic knowledge and abilities. And I eventually concluded that to label such continuous and specific correspondence as I found to exist as coincidence, defied common sense.

The danger of offending Jewish sensibilities, too, suggested territorial boundaries which should never exist amongst those who are seriously seeking spiritual enlightenment. Certainly Cabbala can be, and is, debased by those who teach it or follow it as a cult which requires conformity to arbitrary rituals, particular dress-codes, and group practices. But Ted's use of Cabbala was never like this. For him, it was "the most formidably established and sophisticated, the most awesome in occult reputation, of all memory maps,...operated by techniques of meditation that at the very least [are] like divine prayer whilst at the highest they resemble communication with supernatural beings, if not with the Divine Emanation itself." [12]

Cabbala, in any case, cannot be taught. Each person must make the journey for themselves, and each person is different. So, there is no single, correct way of making the Cabbalistic journey. Guides may help and symbolic maps, such as that of the Cabbalistic Tree, may help, but each journeyer must make their own judgments and choices, must make their own mistakes and be prepared to learn from them, and will proceed as little or as far as they are able.

In Ted's essays on Shakespeare, he describes the Hermetic Cabbalistic Tree as "a pattern of ten ascending stations (Sephiroth – Angelic Powers) positioned on and between the pillars of Justice and Mercy, mounting from the lowest Hells to the Divine

Source.” This is precise and correct. It also demonstrates Ted’s familiarity with the occultist’s Temple of Solomon, the entrance to which is flanked by the pillars of Justice and Mercy.

More generally, The Cabbalistic Tree (or Sephirothic Tree), can be described as a figurative Tree of Life. It is a valuable map for charting life’s journey, because it functions as a mnemonic which, in Ted’s words, “encompasses all the possibilities of existence.” This was the map Ted used as a framework for Birthday Letters and Howls & Whispers, in both of which memory plays such an important part. And it was this map that I, too, learned to use as I followed Ted’s footsteps along its Paths.[13]

On the Cabbalistic Tree, the universal energies, which had been Ted’s subject since he began writing poetry, are represented as manifesting at ten points (called Sephiroth) in ten different, often contradictory, ways. The title traditionally ascribed to each Sephira suggests something of the nature of its energies. The number of each Sephira also has special symbolic meaning. There are, as well, four overlapping Cabbalistic Worlds, each with its own Tree and each more distant from the energies of the Unmanifest Divine Source. Of these, the Atziluthic World is a world of archetypes, and the Briatic World is a world of abstract, fluid patterns. In the Yetziritic World these patterns are given shape, and in the World of Assiah energies become fixed, fragmented and hollow. Ted journeyed through all of these Worlds in Birthday Letters. And, since the Sephiroth of each Tree are connect to each other by 22 Paths, there is a total of 88 Paths in the four overlapping Worlds: and there are 88 poems in the published sequence of Birthday Letters.

Each Path is designated by one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and each letter has a spiritual meaning which illuminates its Path. Each of the 22 cards of the Major Arcana of the Tarot pack is also associated with a Path, and Ted used the symbols, myths and numbers associated with each card as important mnemonic aids for his journeys on this Tree of Life.

Traditionally, there are two ways of making the Cabbalistic journey. The first, called ‘The Path of the Snake’, is the natural evolutionary journey of the species and the individual. It takes us from the unselfconscious, earthy state in which we are born (represented by Malkuth (10) - ‘The World’ - at the foot of the Tree), upwards from Sephira to Sephira towards the fully conscious wholeness of Kether (1) – ‘The Crown’ at the Tree’s apex. We all begin this journey but between the topmost Sephiroth, 1, 2 and 3 (the so-called ‘Supernal Triangle’), and those of the lower part of the Tree lies a gulf which few will cross. To do so, requires the ability and the will to unite and harmonize all the energies we encounter on the lower part of the Tree. This was the framework Ted used for the eleven poems in Howls & Whispers. For Birthday Letters, he used the second route around the Tree which is known as ‘The Path of Wisdom’.

'The Path of Wisdom' starts at the crown of the Tree, Kether (1), in the Atziluthic World and the first steps are taken along Path 1, Aleph, the Path of the Tarot Fool, to Chokmah (2). It then continues along the twenty-two paths in numerical order, returning, finally, to Kether, then progressing in the same fashion through the other three Worlds. Not everyone will attempt this journey. Those who do will each make it in their own, individual, way. Some will complete it: some will not. A few will make this journey several times in a lifetime in different ways, each time with growing understanding. It begins with our first conscious desire for an understanding of our place in the world.

On each Path, the powerful energies of two different Sephira must be understood and balanced within the journeyer and in his or her life. Such balance requires the utmost attention and care as well as honesty, courage and willpower. It also requires a willingness to fail, and to acknowledge failure and learn from it.

Critical to this whole endeavour are will, imagination and memory. Will is necessary for the constant pursuit of any goal, especially one which is difficult and, potentially, dangerous. Imagination is necessary in order to see (or visualize) every possible aspect of any given situation: only then, can one discern and understand past errors and truths, and create new patterns for the future. Memory is essential, because it allows us to rediscover fragments of our past (and of our world's past). Memory and imagination, too, allow us to bring those fragments together, as if gathering up parts of a dismembered body, to re-member them and, if we wish, use our imagination and our will to recreate the whole.

Ted undertook the journey along The Path of Wisdom in order to remember and recreate his past, to heal his psyche, and, through his poetry, to channel healing energies into our world. In *Howls & Whispers*, he undertook the journey on the Path of the Serpent in an attempt to understand his own, and Sylvia's, shared quest for wholeness through their lives and their work.

In spite of the doubts Ted expressed to me and to other friends about publishing these poetic sequences, he said he felt "renewed" once that was done. And, in the months before he died, he spoke of having gained "a sense of inner liberation, a huge sudden possibility of new inner experience. Quite strange." Clearly, the Cabbalistic ritual he enacted in writing these poems and in shaping these sequences worked its healing magic for him. But it was equally important to him that they be published so that others might read them, be moved by them and, perhaps, stirred to remember fragments of their own lives and share some of their healing energies.

Having made my own Cabbalistic journey as I followed Ted's footsteps through Birthday Letters and Howls & Whispers, I have learned that scepticism, judgment, discernment and discretion are necessary at every step of the way. So, I remain sceptical about magic. I do not yet share Ted's faith in the efficacy of its rituals. But I keep well in mind the limits of my own understanding and, especially, Blake's question: "How do you know but eve'ry Bird that cuts the airy way / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" I also heed Blake's warning that "The man [or woman, I would add] who never alters his opinion is like standing water and breeds reptiles of the mind." [14]

1. This letter, and others quoted from here, are now held in the collection, Add 74257, at the British Library.
2. Ann Skea, *The Poetic Quest* (Armidale, N.S.W., Aust.: University of New England Press, 1994).
3. "Myth and Education," republished in *Winter Pollen*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 136.
4. "The Environmental Revolution," *ibid.*, 129.
5. Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara, Calif: Black Sparrow, 1980).
6. Ted Hughes to Keith Sagar, 30 August 1979, reprinted in *The Laughter of Foxes* (Liverpool, Eng.: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 4.
7. Interview with Peter Orr, 1963.
8. A. Wilson, "Testing Ted," *Literary Review*, July 2004.
9. Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*. 210.
10. Cabbala is an ancient, complex, deeply serious and coherent system of spiritual study and development. For Jews, it is a sacred discipline. It became part of the studies of Hermetic Neoplatonists at the time of the Renaissance, and was used by them within the framework of their Christian beliefs.
11. These are freely available on Colin Low's WebPages, because he believes that "no person can control a thing when it is freely available to others."
<http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/nok/index.htm>.
12. Shakespeare and Occult NeoPlatonism,' *Winter Pollen*, 295-6.
13. The steps of both of Ted's poetic-Cabbalistic journeys are traced in detail in *Poetry and Magic* and *Howls & Whispers* on my web-pages at
<http://ann.skea.com/THHome.htm>.
14. William Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in D. Erdman, ed., *The Illuminated Blake* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 114, 116.

©2009 MTTLC, CTITC | Contact Us | design by StrangeSquirrelsTed Hughes and The Goddess
© Ann Skea.

“There is one story and one story only
That will prove worth your telling
Whether as learned bard or gifted child;”

‘To Juan at the Winter Solstice’. Robert Graves.

The Goddess in Hughes work takes as many forms as she does in Nature. In his very early poem, ‘Song’ 1, which he said came to him “as such things should in your nineteenth year – literally a voice in the air”², she, like the goddess of Robert Graves’s writings, is a moon goddess and a muse to whom Hughes pledges allegiance, knowing already the enthralling wonder of her presence and the heartbreak when she turns from him.

‘Song’, however, was written before Hughes had read Graves’s *The White Goddess*³ and, in a letter written to Nick Gammage years later, he recalled that on reading that book for the first time in September 1951 he felt “slight resentment to find [Graves] taking possession of what I considered to be my secret patch”⁴. He was, he said, already familiar with “the more arcane bits” of Middle Eastern, Egyptian, Welsh and Irish mythology, and he regarded them as his specialty; he was especially interested in the “supernatural women”, in particular the “underworld women”; and Indian, Chinese and Japanese mythology had fed into this obsession. He had, he said, “worked out a kind of relationship to it all”.

Nevertheless, he recognized that he and Graves “shared an obsession” and he acknowledged that repeated reading of Graves’s book during his three years at Cambridge University had eventually had a big effect on him. That effect, however, he believed to be largely shaped by his even earlier absorption of the theory of Jung’s *Psychological Types*⁵. He had “read Graves through Jung” and understood Graves’s analysis of various myths as a description of something which “had its roots in biology”.

Briefly, Jung’s *Psychological Types* describes people as belonging to two categories: Introvert (those who see the world primarily through their own internal state and

experience); and Extrovert (those who relate to the world primarily through objects). Jung also distinguishes between two pairs of functions: Thinking and Feeling, both of which are rational, conscious processes (Feeling being judgment, not emotion); and Sensation and Intuition, both of which are irrational and unconscious. For Jung, all these functions are present in the human psyche, where the unconscious, especially Intuition, balances and is balanced by rational consciousness. Whichever functions dominate, the opposite tend to be repressed; a balance is essential, and gross imbalance is the cause of psychological disorder.

Having absorbed these Jungian theories, Hughes was well prepared to accept Graves's arguments against the Socratic emphasis on rationality and logic at the expense of myth, imagination and intuition. Especially, he would have agreed with Graves about the value of myth. This is borne out by his two essays on myth and education⁶, and by *Cave Birds*, which he described in two letters to me as "a critique of sorts of the Socratic abstraction and its consequences" and as the judgment and expiation of the crime for which "history holds him responsible, namely, the murder of the Mediterranean Goddess"⁷. Two early poems also deal directly with our alienation from Nature due to Socratic teachings: 'Egg head'⁸, in which man's brain with "deft opacities" and "lucid sophistries" arrogantly shuts out the evidence of the senses; and 'The Perfect Forms'⁹, in which Socrates is seen as "complacent as a phallus" in his belief in an Absolute which can be understood only through rationality and logic, not through the "fosterings" of nature and the natural evolution of all the many abilities, conscious and unconscious, which have always been essential to our survival.

On the whole, Jung's Psychological Types seems not greatly to have influenced Hughes' early poetry: the presence of Robert Graves multi-faceted goddess is very much more apparent.

She is the poet's "Threefold Muse", Mother, Bride and Hag, and every true poem "is necessarily an invocation of the Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All, the ancient power of fright and lust – the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death". She is Nature, "mistress and governess of all elements", controller of "the planets and the sky, the wholesome winds and the seas", and, especially in Hughes's poetry, she is a shape-shifter possessing the terrible beauty of jaguar, wolf, horse, fox, otter, hare and other creatures which have traditionally been claimed by the Goddess as her own. This is the same Great Goddess who is described by Hughes in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*¹⁰ and whose influence he traced in great detail in *Shakespeare's work*.

Present in Hughes's poetry, too, is the Gravesian 'Theme' of the warring twins: the battle between the God of the Waxing Year (who is the poet) and his twin, the God of the Waning Year (who is the poet's rival, "his blood-brother, his other self, his weird"), for the love of the capricious and all-powerful Goddess¹¹.

Of course there are elements here, too, of Jung's theory of the dissociation of the psyche and the dark, inner, psychic state of the repressed unconscious; and of the split

between the female aspect of the personality (the anima) and the male aspect (the animus). Hughes would have come across these ideas in his later, extensive reading of Jung's works and he explored them in plays like *Eat Crow*¹², and *The Wound*¹³, where the suppressed female energies become demonic, hallucinatory, dream figures.

The Goddess, everywhere in Hughes's work is Nature but she is also the alienated female energies in us and in our world; and from 1963 on, he began to use alchemy as a method of healing these divisions¹⁴.

In *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama*¹⁵, Hughes used alchemy's traditional combination of myth, poetry, spiritual quest and chemical process as a framework for a sequence of poems which culminates, in 'Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days'¹⁶, with the loving, mutual, re-creation of male and female, who "bring each other to perfection" immediately before the final poems of wholeness and reunion with the natural source of life.

In *Remains of Elmet*¹⁷, and *River*, the alchemy is in the poems, the photographs and in Nature herself. She is again the Mother of All, but her world is sick, her creatures poisoned and dying. In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes charts the death of a Kingdom where industrialization and a rigid Puritanical religious fervour left the "withered scalps of souls / In the trees that stand for men", but Nature survives in the howling skylines, the wind, and the "glooms of purple" which swab "the human shape from the freed stones"¹⁸. And in *River*, the "fallen river"... "lies across the lap of his mother/ broken by world"¹⁹, like a pieta. Yet the whole sequence is Hughes's alchemical attempt to recreate in these poems, in "these toilings of psalm", the eternal, healing, nurturing energies, the "nameless/ Teeming inside atoms – and inside the haze / And inside the sun and inside the earth", the energies of the Goddess who is "the font"²⁰, the Mother of All.

Christian Cabbala²¹, too, became a framework for Hughes's words, and the Goddess became the Hebrew Shekinah, the female aspect of God, exiled in our world. In Hebrew teachings, it is the duty of Adam and his descendents to rescue the Shekinah from exile and reunite her with the male aspect of God. So, in *Adam and the Sacred Nine*²², the angelic messengers, the nine birds, come to awaken Adam to his task. Finally, with the "sole of a foot/ Pressed to world-rock", in intimate contact with Nature, Adam understands : "I was made", he acknowledges, "For you"²³.

Like Adam, the poet is subservient to the Muse/ Goddess. In accepting her call he binds himself irrevocably to her. Nowhere is this more apparent in Hughes's work than in the poems he wrote after reading A.K.Ramanujan's translations of the *Vacanas* of Southern Indian mystics²⁴. For these mystics, the god, Siva, was their 'husband' and they devoted their lives completely to his worship. Hughes *Vacanas*, some of which became part of the *Gaudete Epilogue*²⁵ and of *Orts*²⁶, are spoken directly to the Goddess, who is, again, "my Lady", as she was in 'Song'. He speak simply and directly to her of his devotion, rejection, ecstasy and despair, but one unpublished poem in particular is notable for its statement of the role of real women in Hughes's poetry. "Every living woman", he wrote, represents a test which the Goddess sets for the human male. Every

living woman embodies the Goddess. So, in Hughes's poetry real women are all representatives of the Goddess, and it is notable that never, even in Birthday Letters, Howls & Whispers and Capriccio where Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill are clearly re-membered and present, are the women named.

In Hughes's lifelong negotiations with the Goddess, the healing he sought to achieve was both personal and, through the magical power of the word, universal. Poetry, for Hughes, like magic, was "one way of making things happen the way you want them to happen"²⁷.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Hughes, T. *Collected Poems*, Faber, 2000, p.24.
2. Heinze, D. 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry', *The Paris Review*, Vol.37, No. 134, Spring 1995, p.11.
3. Graves, R. *The White Goddess*, Faber, 1961. This book was given to Ted by his school English master, John Fisher, just before he went up to Cambridge.
4. Hughes to Gammage, 7 April 1995, in Reid, C. (ed.) *Letters of Ted Hughes*, Faber, 2007, p. 679.
5. This book belonged to Hughes's sister, Olwyn. Later, as he told Ekbert Fass (*The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980, p.37), he read all the translated volumes, and many of Jung's works are present in his library which is now held at Emory University, Atlanta, USA.
6. Hughes, T. 'Myth and Education', *Children's Literature in Education* 1, APS Publications, March 1970, pp. 55-70; and 'Myth and Education', *Writers, Critics and Children*, Fox, Hammond, Jones, Smith and Sterck (eds.) Heineman, 1976, largely reprinted in Scammell, W. (ed.) *Ted Hughes: Winter Pollen*, Faber 1988, pp.137-153.
7. Hughes to Skea, 10 November 1982 (unpublished); and Reid (ed.) *Letters of Ted Hughes* Hughes to Skea, 3 November 1984, p.191-2.
8. Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p.33.
9. Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p.82.
10. Hughes, T. *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber, 1992, pp.5-12.
11. The early poem 'Fair Choice' (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p.31) deals with this inner battle and specifically links the twins to Cain and Abel, as Graves does.

12. Hughes, *Eat Crow*, written in 1965 but not published until 1971 as a Rainbow Press, limited edition.

13. Hughes, 'The Wound', *Wodwo*, Faber, 1967, pp.104-146.

14. Jung's *Mysterium conjunctionis*: an enquiry into the separation of psychic opposites in alchemy, Routledge, 1963, and *Alchemical Studies*, Routledge, 1967, are both in Hughes's library at Emory University.

15. Hughes, Faber, 1978.

16. Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 437.

17 Hughes, Faber, 1979.

18. Hughes, 'Top Withens', *Collected Poems*, p.486.

19. Hughes, 'The River', *Collected Poems*, p.664.

20. Hughes, 'Salmon Eggs', *Collected Poems*, p. 680-1.

21. Christian Cabbala was introduced to the Occult Neoplatonism of the Renaissance by Pico della Mirandola as a way of linking sacred Hebrew texts with those of Hermeticism and astrology within a Christian framework. Hughes describes it and its use in detail in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, pp.18-34.

22. Hughes, *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, Rainbow Press, 1979; *Collected Poems*, pp.443-452.

23. Hughes, 'The sole of a foot', *Collected Poems*, pp.451-2. A complete analysis of the use of Cabbala in this sequence can be found at [./AdamHome.html](http://AdamHome.html).

24. Hughes read A.K.Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, Penguin Classic, 1973, shortly after it was published and proceeded to write 96 of his own *vacanas* in a notebook now held in Emory University's Rare Book Library: *Ted Hughes Papers*, Box 57/16. My detailed examination of these poems is scheduled to be published in *Ted Hughes: Cambridge to Collected*, by Palgrave Macmillan early in 2013.

25. Hughes, *Collected Poems*, pp.357-375.

26. Hughes, *Collected Poems*, pp.393-451.

27. Hughes, *Critical Forum Series*, Norwich Tapes, 1978. Transcript at: [./CriticalForum.htm](http://CriticalForum.htm)

The Ted Hughes Society

The Ted Hughes Society

Promoting the scholarly reading and discussion of the work of Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes and The Goddess. © Ann Skea 20 January 2019. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and Crow

© Ann Skea

"Mythic poets," Hughes wrote in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*¹, "... seem to be a distinct biological type". In their work, beneath the "surface glitter of the plot", there lies a deep "mythic plane" where, as for the Occult Neoplatonists of Shakespeare's time, "all archaic mythological figures and events are available as a thesaurus of glyphs or token symbols"². For such poets, myth is part of the essence of their poetry rather than something on which they draw from time-to-time.

Hughes, himself, was just such a mythic poet. Through myth he had access to all the intensity and drama of life and death; to universally recognisable patterns of human behaviour; to the powerful energies of gods and devils; and to ritual frameworks which have been used for centuries to contain such powerful energies and emotions. Yet, for him, myth was more than a thesaurus, it was also a divining-rod, a tool for channelling and controlling the energies he worked with, whether they were conscious or subconscious energies, sacred or profane, good or bad.

This is not just my own opinion. There is ample evidence of Hughes' intentions and of his belief in the power of myth in his prose writing (some of which is collected in *Winter Pollen*³) and, especially, in his discussion of Shakespeare's work in *Shakespeare and The Goddess of Complete Being*. There is evidence in an important early interview between Hughes and Ekbert Faas⁴. There is also very persuasive evidence in the patterns which can be discerned in his poetry and which are traced in detail in my own book *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*⁵, and in the work of Sagar, Scigaj, Hirschberg, Faas, Gifford and Roberts⁶.

Hughes was interested in Occult Neoplatonism, in Cabbalah, and in Alchemy and he was knowledgeable about all these arts. This is not to say that he devoted himself to the practice of all or any of them. But he did believe in occult (or hidden) powers and he believed, as did the Neoplatonists, that poetry is a discipline, a mnemonic tool, and that it can be used to bring healing, creative energies into a world which is sorely in need of them. "Poetry", he once said, "is magical... ; is one way of making things happen the way you want them to happen"⁷. In 1989, in an interview with Amzed Hossein, he said "One of the great problems that poetry works at is to renew life, renew the poet's own life, and, by implication, renew the life of the people, if they respond to the way he has done it for himself"⁸.

Hughes' first published poems, in *The Hawk in the Rain*⁹, are examples of his use of small poetic charms which contain powerful animal energies. They were "written in an effort to create an absolutely still language",¹⁰ he told Ekbert Faas. Yet these small, self-contained symbolic creatures are full of energy, not at all the "graven images" that one critic thought them to be¹¹. In *Lupercal*¹², Hughes turned to myth as a magical ritual: "Almost all the poems in *Lupercal* were written as invocations to writing", he told Faas. Like the *Lupercalia* as it was celebrated in Ancient Rome, these poems enact a cathartic rite, and Hughes completed it with a prayer:

... Maker of the world,
Hurrying the lit ghost of man
Age to age while the body hold,
Touch this frozen one.

In broadcast plays, and in other writing and reading in these early years, Hughes continued to develop his knowledge of occult and spiritual disciplines and to experiment with mythic patterns in his work. Between 1959 and 1965, he was writing *The Bacchae* ("based on the Euripides play"¹³); an oratorio based on the *Bardo Thodol* (The Tibetan Book of the Dead); using his own dreams as creative inspiration (*The Wound*¹⁴); beginning to write *Gaudete*¹⁵, with its Dionysian rites; reading about Shamanism, Sufism and Alchemy; and writing a verse play based on an ancient alchemical text, *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*¹⁶. Hughes' Foreword to *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*¹⁷ shows just how much he believed that this particular alchemical text influenced his work.

*Crow*¹⁸, however, was the first sequence of poems in which Hughes began to create an extensive folk-mythology of his own, complete with a fallible God (reminiscent of Blake's, *Nobodaddy*,) and with a questing hero who, in the end, turns out to be inadequate for the task which he, and Hughes, have set themselves. The origin of *Crow* is well documented. In an article written in 1985¹⁹, Hughes explained:

Crow grew out of an invitation by Leonard Baskin to make a book with him simply about crows. He wanted an occasion to add more crows to all the crows that flock through his sculpture, drawings, and engravings in their various transformations. As the protagonist of a book, a crow would become symbolic in any author's hands. And a symbolic crow lives a legendary life. That is how *Crow* took off.

The first *Crow* poems appeared on broadsides and in limited edition books. In 1970, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, was published by Faber and Faber, and it has since been reprinted several times, sometimes with additional poems. It does not contain any of the various fragments of explanatory commentary which Hughes added whenever he read the poems in public or on tape. There are *Crow* poems published in other of Hughes' poetic sequences, and some of these he only identified as part of the *Crow* story long after their first appearance in print ('*Bride and Groom Lie Hidden...*' in

Cave Birds²⁰, for example). The complete Crow story has never been published, but the second edition of Ted Hughes: A Bibliography²¹ has probably the most comprehensive list of Crow poems together with their various locations.

What follows below, is an unpublished extract from the dissertation which I wrote for my M.Litt. degree in 1981. As such, it now represents old knowledge about Crow, but it includes some of Hughes' stated intentions, some of the Crow story, comments on the influence of the Trickster figure of North American Indian folk-lore, and the place of the Crow story in Hughes' use of the Quest as a theme and as a pattern for his own poetic development.

CROW

The poem, 'Theology' (Wodwo p.149), introduces into Hughes' published poetry his own interpretation of the Biblical God. This imperfect, "fatherly" figure, however, had appeared already in *How the Whale Became* and other Stories²², a book of children's fables somewhat similar to Kipling's *Just So Stories*²³. There, Hughes depicted God as a friendly character who manufactured the creatures of the earth out of clay which was then baked in the ovens of the sun ('How the Tortoise Became', HWB p.53). Yet this God is not responsible for all creation. The whale, for example, grows quite of its own accord in God's "little back garden" ('How the Whale became', HWB p.23). Also, unknown to God, a demon with creative powers of its own lives in the middle of the earth where it manufactures the bee and tricks God into breathing life into it ('How the Bee became', HWB p.60). From these children's stories, came the God of the poem 'Logos' in Wodwo²⁴, who is also the fallible, almost human God of the Crow poems which Hughes had begun writing in 1966.

In *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, Hughes, for the first time, wrote a sequence of poems within a framework which took the form of a folk-mythology of his own construction. Through the quasi-human figure of Crow, he continued his own journey of exploration into the human psyche and, at the same time, his handling of the death/rebirth theme in his poetry began to be more complex. It took on the aspect of a quest, a Shamanic journey to the underworld, which Hughes believed to be the basic theme in many folktales, myths and narrative poems²⁵.

The poems included in *Crow* are part of a large number of poems which make up a "vast folk epic"²⁶ which tells the story of Crow. Hughes began this story at the suggestion of American artist, Leonard Baskin, who wanted an accompanying text for some of his anthropomorphic bird engravings. Amazingly, Hughes once said that he began *Crow* as children's story²⁷: but the eventual development of Crow's character, the sardonic, sometimes gruesome humour of the poems, and Hughes' sophisticated and heretical manipulation of Biblical stories, has made *Crow* very much a bird for adults. Speaking on the BBC before the publication of *Crow* Hughes explained something of the Crow story and the nature of Crow:

Nobody knows quite how he was created or how he appeared.
He was created by God's nightmare. What exactly that is I

tried to define through the length of the poem, or the succession of poems²⁸.

More details of the Crow story were given by Hughes at his poetry reading at the Adelaide Festival in 1976²⁹:

God is having a nightmare. This hand/voice – this thing - arrives at the moment he falls asleep and grabs him round the throat, rushes him through the Universe, pushes him beyond the stars and ploughs up the earth with his face and throws him back into heaven. The moment he dozes off this hand arrives and it all happens again, and he can't understand what there can be in his creation which is so hostile... Eventually this voice/hand speaks.

An argument develops between God and his Nightmare about the adequacy of Man as a creation. "God is very defensive of Man. Man is a very good and successful invention and given the materials and situation he's quite adequate". But whilst God is arguing with his nightmare, Man has

sent up a representative to the gates of Heaven... to ask God to take life back because men are fed up with it. So God is enraged that man has let him down – so he challenges the voice to do better: given the materials and the whole set-up, to produce something better than Man.

The Nightmare plunges back to "ferment and gestate in matter" and a little embryo begins. That is how Crow was created. As a creation which is better than Man, Crow is a failure, for Hughes also said that "maybe [Crow's] ambition is to become a man". However, Hughes made it clear that the actual Crow story is "not really relevant to the poems as they stand: ... I think they have a life a little aside from it. The story brought me to the poems ... (it) was a sort of machine that assembled them".³⁰ He went on to say:

The first idea of Crow was really an idea of style. In folktales the prince going on the adventure comes to the stable full of beautiful horses and he needs a horse for the next stage and the King's daughter advises him to take none of the beautiful horses that he'll be offered but to choose the dirty, scabby little foal. You see, I throw out the eagles and choose Crow. The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a Crow would sing. In other words songs with no music whatsoever, in a super simple and a super ugly language which would in a way shed everything except just what he wanted to say without any other consideration and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing.

This allegory of the folktale prince and his choice of horse is an interesting one, for it shows Hughes deliberately adopting the "wretched, black, horrible, little nothing"³¹

(which is Crow as God sees him when he first appears), as his vehicle and 'mask' for his new poetic journey.

Crow comes complete with all the mythological and folk-loric accretions which crows have gathered through their long existence, and, of course, all the natural characteristics of the crow species. Some of these attributes Hughes adverted to in his BBC talk when he said:

The Crow is the most intelligent of birds. He lives in just about every piece of land on earth and there's a great body of folk lore about crows, of course. No carrion will kill a crow. The crow is the indestructible bird who suffers everything, suffers nothing... 32.

In a letter to Alan Bold³³, he also wrote:

Crow is the bird of Bran, is the oldest and highest totem creature of Britain ... England pretends to a lion – but that is a late fake import. England's autochthonous Totem is the Crow. Whatever the colour of Englishman you scratch you come to some sort of crow.

Hughes, therefore, makes it clear that Crow has many characteristics in common with Man. Also, given the cheeky, interfering, amoral, destructive and sometimes constructive personality which emerges through the medium of Crow's "life and songs", plus Hughes' own predilection for mythological archetypes, the comparison of Crow with the Trickster figure common in many mythologies is natural³⁴.

Paul Radin, an authority on the Trickster Cycles of the North American Indians, describes Trickster as being:

... at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good or evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being ... Laughter, humour and irony permeate everything Trickster does ... he is primarily an inchoate being of undetermined proportions, a figure foreshadowing the shape of man³⁵.

Here is the counterpart of Hughes' Crow, who, laughing, singing and eating, displays his supreme egotism by "Flying the black flag of himself" ('Crow Blacker than Ever', C p.69) through the havoc and horror which he has helped to create.

Trickster has never been restricted to one society. In European countries he appears in the guise of Jester or Fool, and his roots in the human psyche are deep. Alan Garner

has collected Trickster stories from many countries in his book *The Guizer* and he writes:

If we take the elements from which our emotions are built and give them separate names such as Mother, Hero, Father, King, Child, Queen, the element that I think marks most of us is that of the Fool. It is where our humanity lies. For the Fool is the advocate of uncertainty: he is at once creator and destroyer, bringer of help and harm. He draws a boundary for chaos, so that we can make sense of the rest. He is the shadow that shapes the light. Psychology calls him Trickster. I have called him Guizer.

Guizer is the proper word for an actor in a mumming play. He is comical, grotesque, stupid, cunning, ambiguous. He is sometimes part animal, and always part something else. The something else is what is so special. He is the dawning godhead in Man³⁶.

In these quotations from Radin and Garner we can see the characteristics of Hughes' Crow and his connection with Man, but the psychological implications of Crow's character are broader still. Radin writes that the Trickster cycle "represents our efforts to deal with the problem of growing up": that it is a "speculum mentis wherein is depicted man's struggle with himself and with a world into which he had been thrust without his volition and consent ... an attempt by man to solve his problems inward and outward"³⁷.

On a similar psychological level, C. J. Jung's commentary on Radin's collection of Trickster Cycles equates the trickster figure with "all the inferior traits of character in individuals", and he accounts for its persistence in man's stories by the explanation that "since the individual shadow is never absent as a Component of personality, the collective figure can construct itself out of it continually"³⁸. Crow, it appears was in many ways just such a self constructing figure, because Hughes has said that the poems:

... were usually something of a shock to write. Mostly they wrote themselves quite rapidly ... and several of them that seem quite ordinary now arrived with a sense of having done something ... tabu³⁹.

By adopting and developing this trickster figure Hughes was, therefore, extending his exploration into his own mind and (if Jung is correct in his interpretation of Trickster) into the human mind in general. In so doing, Hughes extended the death/rebirth theme of his poetry to include the idea of spiritual growth and rebirth for Man, which is a most important part of the Trickster Cycle. This pattern has been traced in detail in the Crow poems by Sagar⁴⁰ and Hirschberg⁴¹.

In Crow, Hughes not only redefined God, he adopted Biblical language and style, recreated the Biblical Genesis story, perverted the message of the supreme power of

God's love and cast Crow in the role of "crucified" and reborn hero('Crow and the Sea', C p.82) and survivor of the Apocalypse. Crow was subjected to teaching and to tests, he was meant to learn humanity and wholeness, to develop a soul, but only in poems published in a later poetic sequence (Cave Birds) did he achieve real progress on his quest. As Sagar noted, "Crow is Everyman who will not acknowledge that everything he most hates and fears – The Black Beast – is within him"⁴².

Crow's interference in God's work begins with 'A Childish Prank'(C p.19). God, Hughes explained in his story⁴³, is at first "rather indulgent" towards Crow. "He tends to show it the beauties and let it look on while he shows the marvels of the beginning". Having made Adam and Eve, however, God has problems getting their souls into their bodies. "The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep". Crow intervenes, and in so doing invents sex as an urge which man and woman cannot control or understand. Meanwhile:

God went on sleeping
Crow went on laughing

The Trickster element in Crow's behaviour is obvious, but Hughes, too, is breaking tabus.

God tries to teach Crow human skills and human emotions - tries to change his amoral, selfish nature. In 'Crow's First Lesson'(C p.20), God attempts to teach Crow how to talk, but his efforts to teach him the word 'Love' result only in the creation of horror. Crow gapes, and vomits up his own devouring versions of love – "the white shark"; "a bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito"; and man's bodiless head with woman's vulva dropped over it and tightening around his neck. God, defeated, goes back to sleeping, leaving Crow to his own devices and Crow takes advantage of God's slumber by inventing his own 'communion'. This is a devastating parody of the Christian rite, in which Crow literally partakes of God's body ('Crow Communes', C p.30). Nor is this all. Crow next invents his own Theology ('Crow's Theology', C p.35) which includes a God who is

... much bigger than the other
Loving his enemies
And having all the weapons.

This sacrilegious reconstruction of Biblical lore, which is responsible for the stunning impact of some of the poems, is a clear indication of the way in which Crow resembles the Trickster Cycles, for Trickster is traditionally a "breaker of taboos and destroyer of the holy-of-holies"⁴⁴. It also illustrates the extent to which Hughes has adopted the Crow 'mask' in these poems, and how he takes on himself the role of Trickster. In Crow, Hughes is doing just what Jung describes when he says that "there is something of the Trickster in the character of the shaman and medicine-man, for he, too, often plays malicious jokes on people"⁴⁵

Crow may well seem to some like a malicious joke, and those critics who were convinced that Hughes enjoyed wallowing in violence and "the eager pursuit of blood and thunder"⁴⁶ certainly felt vindicated when Crow was published. Crow, however, is a

very modern version of the Trickster Cycle fitting well with the surrealist and absurd sentiments of other twentieth century writers such as Kafka; of artists such as Francis Bacon; and of some of the Eastern European Poets whose works Hughes has helped to make available in translation. In it he succeeds, as Calvin Bedient commented, in joining “the twin nihilistic themes of the century – the Id and the Void – with witty and enormous invention”⁴⁷.

Hughes himself, however, seemed to feel that the Trickster Cycle had, in a way, taken him too far, too fast. He described the writing of the Crow poems to Faas as being like “putting [himself] through a process”, and when asked by Faas if he felt the process had come to a kind of completion, he said:

In a way I think I projected too far into the future. I'd like to get the rest of it. But maybe it will take a different form.⁴⁸

Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow ends with Hughes' invocation to the creative/destructive energies of Nature which brought him Crow: “Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood”. Subsequently, he returned to the theme of the quest and of spiritual rebirth in Cave Birds and Gaudete, where he examined it again in two forms which are as different from each other as they are from Crow.

1 Hughes, T. Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, London, Faber, 1992, p.39

2 op.cit. pp.32-3

3 Hughes, T., Winter Pollen, London, Faber, 1994.

4 Faas, E., ‘Ted Hughes's Crow’, London Magazine, January 1971, p.17. Reprinted in Ted Hughes: the unaccommodated universe, California, Black Sparrow, 1980.

5 Skea, A., Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest, Armidale, UNE Press, 1994

6 Sagar, K., The Art of Ted Hughes, Manchester, MUP, 1978. Scigaj, L., The Poetry of Ted Hughes, Iowa, UIP, 1986, Hirschberg, S., Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes, Dublin, Wolfhound, 1981. Gifford, T. and Roberts, N., Ted Hughes, a Critical Study, London, Faber, 1981.

7 Hughes, T., Review of Bowra, C.M. Primitive Song, The Listener, 3 May 1962.

8 This is from one of two interviews conducted in 1989 by Dr Amzed Hossein at the Asia Poetry Festival in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where Ted Hughes was a Special Guest.

9 Hughes, T. The Hawk in the Rain, London, Faber, 1957.

10 Faas, Ted Hughes: the unaccommodated universe, op.cit. Appendix II, pp. 208-9

11 James, G.I., ‘The Animal Poems of Ted Hughes: A devaluation’, Southern Review, Vol.II No.3, University of Adelaide, 1967, p.200.

12 Hughes, T. Lupercal, London, Faber, 1960.

13 Plath, A. (Ed.) Sylvia Plath: Letters Home, N.Y., Harper and Row. 1975, 7 October 1959.

14 A play broadcast 1 February 1962, collected in Wodwo.

15 Hughes, T. Gaudete, London, Faber, 1977.

16 Andreae, J.V. (Trans. Foxcroft, E. 1690), The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz, London, Minerva.

- 17 Hughes,T. Difficulties of a Bridegroom, London, Faber, 1995.
- 18 Hughes,T. Crow: From the Life and Songs of a Crow, London, Faber, 1970
- 19 Hughes,T., 'Crow on the Beach' reprinted in Winter Pollen, op.cit. p.243.
- 20 Hughes,T., Cave Birds, London, Faber, 1975.
- 21 Sagar,K. & Tabor,S., Ted Hughes: A Bibliography (2nd.Edition), London, Mansell, 1998.
- 22 Hughes,T., How The Whale Became, London, Faber, 1963.
- 23 Kipling,R., Just So Stories, London, Macmillan, 1960.
- 24 Hughes,T., Wodwo, London, Faber, 1967.
- 25 Faas, London Magazine, op.cit. p.17.
- 26 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, tape recording of Hughes reading Crow poems at The Adelaide Festival, March 1976.
- 27 ibid.
- 28 'Ted Hughes's Crow', The Listener, 30 July 1970. Includes quotations from BBC Radio 3 broadcast, Poetry Now, 6 July 1970.
- 29 ABC tape, op.cit.
- 30 Faas, op.cit. p.18.
- 31 ABC tape, op.cit.
- 32 The Listener, op.cit
- 33 Bold,A.(Ed), The Cambridge Book of English Verse, London, CUP, 1976. Quoted in a note on 'A Childish Prank', p.234.
- 34 Sagar,K., The Art of Ted Hughes, op.cit. p.10.
- 35 Radin,P., The Trickster, NY, Greenwood, 1969, pp.ix-x.
- 36 Garner,A., The Guizer: A Book of Fools, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1975, p.9.
- 37 Radin, op.cit. p.xi.
- 38 Jung,G.J., commentary on the Trickster Cycles in Radin, op.cit. p.206.
- 39 Faas, op.cit. p.18.
- 40 Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, op.cit.
- 41 Hirschberg, op.cit.
- 42 Sagar,K., Ted Hughes: Writers and Their Work no. 27, London, Longman, 1972.
- 43 ABC tape, op.cit.
- 44 Radin, op.cit. p.152.
- 45 Jung, op.cit. p.196.
- 46 Hamilton,I., 'A Mouthful of Blood', Crow, TLS, 8 January 1971.
- 47 Bedient,C., New York Times Book Review, 13 January 1974.
- 48 Faas, London Magazine, op.cit. p.18.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and Crow

© Ann Skea

“Mythic poets,” Hughes wrote in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*¹, “... seem to be a distinct biological type”. In their work, beneath the “surface glitter of the plot”, there lies a deep “mythic plane” where, as for the Occult Neoplatonists of Shakespeare’s time, “all archaic mythological figures and events are available as a thesaurus of glyphs or token symbols”². For such poets, myth is part of the essence of their poetry rather than something on which they draw from time-to-time.

Hughes, himself, was just such a mythic poet. Through myth he had access to all the intensity and drama of life and death; to universally recognisable patterns of human behaviour; to the powerful energies of gods and devils; and to ritual frameworks which have been used for centuries to contain such powerful energies and emotions. Yet, for him, myth was more than a thesaurus, it was also a divining-rod, a tool for channelling and controlling the energies he worked with, whether they were conscious or subconscious energies, sacred or profane, good or bad.

This is not just my own opinion. There is ample evidence of Hughes’ intentions and of his belief in the power of myth in his prose writing (some of which is collected in *Winter Pollen*³) and, especially, in his discussion of Shakespeare’s work in *Shakespeare and The Goddess of Complete Being*. There is evidence in an important early interview between Hughes and Ekbert Faas⁴. There is also very persuasive evidence in the patterns which can be discerned in his poetry and which are traced in detail in my own book *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*⁵, and in the work of Sagar, Scigaj, Hirschberg, Faas, Gifford and Roberts⁶.

Hughes was interested in Occult Neoplatonism, in Cabbalah, and in Alchemy and he was knowledgeable about all these arts. This is not to say that he devoted himself to the practice of all or any of them. But he did believe in occult (or hidden) powers and he believed, as did the Neoplatonists, that poetry is a discipline, a mnemonic tool, and that it can be used to bring healing, creative energies into a world which is sorely in need of them. “Poetry”, he once said, “is magical... ; is one way of making things happen the way you want them to happen”⁷. In 1989, in an interview with Amzed Hossein, he said “One of the great problems that poetry works at is to renew life, renew the poet’s own life, and, by implication, renew the life of the people, if they respond to the way he has done it for himself”⁸.

Hughes’ first published poems, in *The Hawk in the Rain*⁹, are examples of his use of small poetic charms which contain powerful animal energies. They were “written in an effort to create an absolutely still language”,¹⁰ he told Ekbert Faas. Yet these small, self-contained symbolic creatures are full of energy, not at all the “graven images” that one critic thought them to be¹¹. In *Lupercal*¹², Hughes turned to myth as a magical ritual: “Almost all the poems in *Lupercal* were written as invocations to writing”, he told Faas. Like the *Lupercalia* as it was celebrated in Ancient Rome, these poems enact a cathartic rite, and Hughes completed it with a prayer:

... Maker of the world,
Hurrying the lit ghost of man

Age to age while the body hold,
Touch this frozen one.

In broadcast plays, and in other writing and reading in these early years, Hughes continued to develop his knowledge of occult and spiritual disciplines and to experiment with mythic patterns in his work. Between 1959 and 1965, he was writing *The Bacchae* ("based on the Euripides play"¹³); an oratorio based on the *Bardo Thodol* (The Tibetan Book of the Dead); using his own dreams as creative inspiration (*The Wound*¹⁴); beginning to write *Gaudete*¹⁵, with its Dionysian rites; reading about Shamanism, Sufism and Alchemy; and writing a verse play based on an ancient alchemical text, *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*¹⁶. Hughes' Foreword to *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*¹⁷ shows just how much he believed that this particular alchemical text influenced his work.

*Crow*¹⁸, however, was the first sequence of poems in which Hughes began to create an extensive folk-mythology of his own, complete with a fallible God (reminiscent of Blake's, *Nobodaddy*,) and with a questing hero who, in the end, turns out to be inadequate for the task which he, and Hughes, have set themselves. The origin of *Crow* is well documented. In an article written in 1985¹⁹, Hughes explained:

Crow grew out of an invitation by Leonard Baskin to make a book with him simply about crows. He wanted an occasion to add more crows to all the crows that flock through his sculpture, drawings, and engravings in their various transformations. As the protagonist of a book, a crow would become symbolic in any author's hands. And a symbolic crow lives a legendary life. That is how *Crow* took off.

The first *Crow* poems appeared on broadsides and in limited edition books. In 1970, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, was published by Faber and Faber, and it has since been reprinted several times, sometimes with additional poems. It does not contain any of the various fragments of explanatory commentary which Hughes added whenever he read the poems in public or on tape. There are *Crow* poems published in other of Hughes' poetic sequences, and some of these he only identified as part of the *Crow* story long after their first appearance in print ('*Bride and Groom Lie Hidden...*' in *Cave Birds*²⁰, for example). The complete *Crow* story has never been published, but the second edition of *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography*²¹ has probably the most comprehensive list of *Crow* poems together with their various locations.

What follows below, is an unpublished extract from the dissertation which I wrote for my M.Litt. degree in 1981. As such, it now represents old knowledge about *Crow*, but it includes some of Hughes' stated intentions, some of the *Crow* story, comments on the influence of the Trickster figure of North American Indian folk-lore, and the place of the *Crow* story in Hughes' use of the Quest as a theme and as a pattern for his own poetic development.

CROW

The poem, 'Theology' (Wodwo p.149), introduces into Hughes' published poetry his own interpretation of the Biblical God. This imperfect, "fatherly" figure, however, had appeared already in *How the Whale Became* and other Stories²², a book of children's fables somewhat similar to Kipling's *Just So Stories*²³. There, Hughes depicted God as a friendly character who manufactured the creatures of the earth out of clay which was then baked in the ovens of the sun ('How the Tortoise Became', HWB p.53). Yet this God is not responsible for all creation. The whale, for example, grows quite of its own accord in God's "little back garden" ('How the Whale became', HWB p.23). Also, unknown to God, a demon with creative powers of its own lives in the middle of the earth where it manufactures the bee and tricks God into breathing life into it ('How the Bee became', HWB p.60). From these children's stories, came the God of the poem 'Logos' in Wodwo²⁴, who is also the fallible, almost human God of the Crow poems which Hughes had begun writing in 1966.

In *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, Hughes, for the first time, wrote a sequence of poems within a framework which took the form of a folk-mythology of his own construction. Through the quasi-human figure of Crow, he continued his own journey of exploration into the human psyche and, at the same time, his handling of the death/rebirth theme in his poetry began to be more complex. It took on the aspect of a quest, a Shamanic journey to the underworld, which Hughes believed to be the basic theme in many folktales, myths and narrative poems²⁵.

The poems included in *Crow* are part of a large number of poems which make up a "vast folk epic"²⁶ which tells the story of Crow. Hughes began this story at the suggestion of American artist, Leonard Baskin, who wanted an accompanying text for some of his anthropomorphic bird engravings. Amazingly, Hughes once said that he began *Crow* as children's story²⁷: but the eventual development of Crow's character, the sardonic, sometimes gruesome humour of the poems, and Hughes' sophisticated and heretical manipulation of Biblical stories, has made *Crow* very much a bird for adults. Speaking on the BBC before the publication of *Crow* Hughes explained something of the Crow story and the nature of Crow:

Nobody knows quite how he was created or how he appeared.
He was created by God's nightmare. What exactly that is I
tried to define through the length of the poem, or the
succession of poems²⁸.

More details of the Crow story were given by Hughes at his poetry reading at the Adelaide Festival in 1976²⁹:

God is having a nightmare. This hand/voice – this thing -
arrives at the moment he falls asleep and grabs him round
the throat, rushes him through the Universe, pushes him
beyond the stars and ploughs up the earth with his face
and throws him back into heaven. The moment he dozes off
this hand arrives and it all happens again, and he can't
understand what there can be in his creation which is so

hostile... Eventually this voice/hand speaks.

An argument develops between God and his Nightmare about the adequacy of Man as a creation. "God is very defensive of Man. Man is a very good and successful invention and given the materials and situation he's quite adequate". But whilst God is arguing with his nightmare, Man has

sent up a representative to the gates of Heaven... to ask God to take life back because men are fed up with it. So God is enraged that man has let him down – so he challenges the voice to do better: given the materials and the whole set-up, to produce something better than Man.

The Nightmare plunges back to "ferment and gestate in matter" and a little embryo begins. That is how Crow was created. As a creation which is better than Man, Crow is a failure, for Hughes also said that "maybe [Crow's] ambition is to become a man". However, Hughes made it clear that the actual Crow story is "not really relevant to the poems as they stand: ... I think they have a life a little aside from it. The story brought me to the poems ... (it) was a sort of machine that assembled them".³⁰ He went on to say:

The first idea of Crow was really an idea of style. In folktales the prince going on the adventure comes to the stable full of beautiful horses and he needs a horse for the next stage and the King's daughter advises him to take none of the beautiful horses that he'll be offered but to choose the dirty, scabby little foal. You see, I throw out the eagles and choose Crow. The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a Crow would sing. In other words songs with no music whatsoever, in a super simple and a super ugly language which would in a way shed everything except just what he wanted to say without any other consideration and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing.

This allegory of the folktale prince and his choice of horse is an interesting one, for it shows Hughes deliberately adopting the "wretched, black, horrible, little nothing"³¹ (which is Crow as God sees him when he first appears), as his vehicle and 'mask' for his new poetic journey.

Crow comes complete with all the mythological and folk-loric accretions which crows have gathered through their long existence, and, of course, all the natural characteristics of the crow species. Some of these attributes Hughes adverted to in his BBC talk when he said:

The Crow is the most intelligent of birds. He lives in just about every piece of land on earth and there's a great body of folk lore about crows, of course. No carrion will kill a crow. The crow is the indestructible bird who

suffers everything, suffers nothing... 32.
In a letter to Alan Bold³³, he also wrote:

Crow is the bird of Bran, is the oldest and highest totem creature of Britain ... England pretends to a lion – but that is a late fake import. England's autochthonous Totem is the Crow. Whatever the colour of Englishman you scratch you come to some sort of crow.

Hughes, therefore, makes it clear that Crow has many characteristics in common with Man. Also, given the cheeky, interfering, amoral, destructive and sometimes constructive personality which emerges through the medium of Crow's "life and songs", plus Hughes' own predilection for mythological archetypes, the comparison of Crow with the Trickster figure common in many mythologies is natural³⁴.

Paul Radin, an authority on the Trickster Cycles of the North American Indians, describes Trickster as being:

... at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good or evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being ...
Laughter, humour and irony permeate everything Trickster does ... he is primarily an inchoate being of undetermined proportions, a figure foreshadowing the shape of man³⁵.

Here is the counterpart of Hughes' Crow, who, laughing, singing and eating, displays his supreme egotism by "Flying the black flag of himself" ('Crow Blacker than Ever', C p.69) through the havoc and horror which he has helped to create.

Trickster has never been restricted to one society. In European countries he appears in the guise of Jester or Fool, and his roots in the human psyche are deep. Alan Garner has collected Trickster stories from many countries in his book *The Guizer* and he writes:

If we take the elements from which our emotions are built and give them separate names such as Mother, Hero, Father, King, Child, Queen, the element that I think marks most of us is that of the Fool. It is where our humanity lies. For the Fool is the advocate of uncertainty: he is at once creator and destroyer, bringer of help and harm. He draws a boundary for chaos, so that we can make sense of the rest. He is the shadow that shapes the light. Psychology calls him Trickster. I have called him Guizer.

Guizer is the proper word for an actor in a mumming play.
He is comical, grotesque, stupid, cunning, ambiguous. He
is sometimes part animal, and always part something else.
The something else is what is so special. He is the
dawning godhead in Man³⁶.

In these quotations from Radin and Garner we can see the characteristics of Hughes' Crow and his connection with Man, but the psychological implications of Crow's character are broader still. Radin writes that the Trickster cycle "represents our efforts to deal with the problem of growing up": that it is a "speculum mentis wherein is depicted man's struggle with himself and with a world into which he had been thrust without his volition and consent ... an attempt by man to solve his problems inward and outward"³⁷.

On a similar psychological level, C. J. Jung's commentary on Radin's collection of Trickster Cycles equates the trickster figure with "all the inferior traits of character in individuals", and he accounts for its persistence in man's stories by the explanation that "since the individual shadow is never absent as a Component of personality, the collective figure can construct itself out of it continually"³⁸. Crow, it appears was in many ways just such a self constructing figure, because Hughes has said that the poems:

... were usually something of a shock to write. Mostly they
wrote themselves quite rapidly ... and several of them
that seem quite ordinary now arrived with a sense of
having done something ... tabu³⁹.

By adopting and developing this trickster figure Hughes was, therefore, extending his exploration into his own mind and (if Jung is correct in his interpretation of Trickster) into the human mind in general. In so doing, Hughes extended the death/rebirth theme of his poetry to include the idea of spiritual growth and rebirth for Man, which is a most important part of the Trickster Cycle. This pattern has been traced in detail in the Crow poems by Sagar⁴⁰ and Hirschberg⁴¹.

In Crow, Hughes not only redefined God, he adopted Biblical language and style, recreated the Biblical Genesis story, perverted the message of the supreme power of God's love and cast Crow in the role of "crucified" and reborn hero ('Crow and the Sea', C p.82) and survivor of the Apocalypse. Crow was subjected to teaching and to tests, he was meant to learn humanity and wholeness, to develop a soul, but only in poems published in a later poetic sequence (Cave Birds) did he achieve real progress on his quest. As Sagar noted, "Crow is Everyman who will not acknowledge that everything he most hates and fears – The Black Beast – is within him"⁴².

Crow's interference in God's work begins with 'A Childish Prank' (C p.19). God, Hughes explained in his story⁴³, is at first "rather indulgent" towards Crow. "He tends to show it the beauties and let it look on while he shows the marvels of the beginning". Having made Adam and Eve, however, God has problems getting their souls into their bodies. "The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep". Crow intervenes, and in so doing

invents sex as an urge which man and woman cannot control or understand.
Meanwhile:

God went on sleeping
Crow went on laughing

The Trickster element in Crow's behaviour is obvious, but Hughes, too, is breaking tabus.

God tries to teach Crow human skills and human emotions - tries to change his amoral, selfish nature. In 'Crow's First Lesson' (C p.20), God attempts to teach Crow how to talk, but his efforts to teach him the word 'Love' result only in the creation of horror. Crow gapes, and vomits up his own devouring versions of love – "the white shark"; "a bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito"; and man's bodiless head with woman's vulva dropped over it and tightening around his neck. God, defeated, goes back to sleeping, leaving Crow to his own devices and Crow takes advantage of God's slumber by inventing his own 'communion'. This is a devastating parody of the Christian rite, in which Crow literally partakes of God's body ('Crow Communes', C p.30). Nor is this all. Crow next invents his own Theology ('Crow's Theology', C p.35) which includes a God who is

... much bigger than the other
Loving his enemies
And having all the weapons.

This sacrilegious reconstruction of Biblical lore, which is responsible for the stunning impact of some of the poems, is a clear indication of the way in which Crow resembles the Trickster Cycles, for Trickster is traditionally a "breaker of taboos and destroyer of the holy-of-holies"⁴⁴. It also illustrates the extent to which Hughes has adopted the Crow 'mask' in these poems, and how he takes on himself the role of Trickster. In Crow, Hughes is doing just what Jung describes when he says that "there is something of the Trickster in the character of the shaman and medicine-man, for he, too, often plays malicious jokes on people"⁴⁵

Crow may well seem to some like a malicious joke, and those critics who were convinced that Hughes enjoyed wallowing in violence and "the eager pursuit of blood and thunder"⁴⁶ certainly felt vindicated when Crow was published. Crow, however, is a very modern version of the Trickster Cycle fitting well with the surrealist and absurd sentiments of other twentieth century writers such as Kafka; of artists such as Francis Bacon; and of some of the Eastern European Poets whose works Hughes has helped to make available in translation. In it he succeeds, as Calvin Bedient commented, in joining "the twin nihilistic themes of the century – the Id and the Void – with witty and enormous invention"⁴⁷.

Hughes himself, however, seemed to feel that the Trickster Cycle had, in a way, taken him too far, too fast. He described the writing of the Crow poems to Faas as being like "putting [himself] through a process", and when asked by Faas if he felt the process had come to a kind of completion, he said:

In a way I think I projected too far into the future. I'd like to get the rest of it. But maybe it will take a different form.⁴⁸

Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow ends with Hughes' invocation to the creative/destructive energies of Nature which brought him Crow: "Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood". Subsequently, he returned to the theme of the quest and of spiritual rebirth in *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete*, where he examined it again in two forms which are as different from each other as they are from Crow.

- 1 Hughes, T. *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, London, Faber, 1992, p.39
- 2 op.cit. pp.32-3
- 3 Hughes, T., *Winter Pollen*, London, Faber, 1994.
- 4 Faas, E., 'Ted Hughes's Crow', *London Magazine*, January 1971, p.17. Reprinted in *Ted Hughes: the unaccommodated universe*, California, Black Sparrow, 1980.
- 5 Skea, A., *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, Armidale, UNE Press, 1994
- 6 Sagar, K., *The Art of Ted Hughes*, Manchester, MUP, 1978. Scigaj, L., *The Poetry of Ted Hughes*, Iowa, UIP, 1986, Hirschberg, S., *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes*, Dublin, Wolfhound, 1981. Gifford, T. and Roberts, N., *Ted Hughes, a Critical Study*, London, Faber, 1981.
- 7 Hughes, T., Review of Bowra, C.M. *Primitive Song*, *The Listener*, 3 May 1962.
- 8 This is from one of two interviews conducted in 1989 by Dr Amzed Hossein at the Asia Poetry Festival in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where Ted Hughes was a Special Guest.
- 9 Hughes, T. *The Hawk in the Rain*, London, Faber, 1957.
- 10 Faas, *Ted Hughes: the unaccommodated universe*, op.cit. Appendix II, pp. 208-9
- 11 James, G.I., 'The Animal Poems of Ted Hughes: A devaluation', *Southern Review*, Vol.II No.3, University of Adelaide, 1967, p.200.
- 12 Hughes, T. *Lupercal*, London, Faber, 1960.
- 13 Plath, A. (Ed.) *Sylvia Plath: Letters Home*, N.Y., Harper and Row. 1975, 7 October 1959.
- 14 A play broadcast 1 February 1962, collected in *Wodwo*.
- 15 Hughes, T. *Gaudete*, London, Faber, 1977.
- 16 Andreae, J.V. (Trans. Foxcroft, E. 1690), *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, London, Minerva.
- 17 Hughes, T. *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*, London, Faber, 1995.
- 18 Hughes, T. *Crow: From the Life and Songs of a Crow*, London, Faber, 1970
- 19 Hughes, T., 'Crow on the Beach' reprinted in *Winter Pollen*, op.cit. p.243.
- 20 Hughes, T., *Cave Birds*, London, Faber, 1975.
- 21 Sagar, K. & Tabor, S., *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography* (2nd.Edition), London, Mansell, 1998.
- 22 Hughes, T., *How The Whale Became*, London, Faber, 1963.
- 23 Kipling, R., *Just So Stories*, London, Macmillan, 1960.
- 24 Hughes, T., *Wodwo*, London, Faber, 1967.
- 25 Faas, *London Magazine*, op.cit. p.17.
- 26 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, tape recording of Hughes reading Crow poems at The Adelaide Festival, March 1976.

- 27 *ibid.*
- 28 'Ted Hughes's Crow', *The Listener*, 30 July 1970. Includes quotations from BBC Radio 3 broadcast, *Poetry Now*, 6 July 1970.
- 29 ABC tape, *op.cit.*
- 30 Faas, *op.cit.* p.18.
- 31 ABC tape, *op.cit.*
- 32 *The Listener*, *op.cit.*
- 33 Bold, A. (Ed), *The Cambridge Book of English Verse*, London, CUP, 1976. Quoted in a note on 'A Childish Prank', p.234.
- 34 Sagar, K., *The Art of Ted Hughes*, *op.cit.* p.10.
- 35 Radin, P., *The Trickster*, NY, Greenwood, 1969, pp.ix-x.
- 36 Garner, A., *The Guizer: A Book of Fools*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1975, p.9.
- 37 Radin, *op.cit.* p.xi.
- 38 Jung, G.J., commentary on the Trickster Cycles in Radin, *op.cit.* p.206.
- 39 Faas, *op.cit.* p.18.
- 40 Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, *op.cit.*
- 41 Hirschberg, *op.cit.*
- 42 Sagar, K., *Ted Hughes: Writers and Their Work* no. 27, London, Longman, 1972.
- 43 ABC tape, *op.cit.*
- 44 Radin, *op.cit.* p.152.
- 45 Jung, *op.cit.* p.196.
- 46 Hamilton, I., 'A Mouthful of Blood', *Crow*, TLS, 8 January 1971.
- 47 Bedient, C., *New York Times Book Review*, 13 January 1974.
- 48 Faas, *London Magazine*, *op.cit.* p.18.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTED HUGHES: THE POETIC QUEST
Ann Skea

Ouroborus

University of New England Press, 1994.

This book examines *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River*, and shows how Hughes used myth, mysticism and alchemy as a magical, transforming power in his poetry.

The author draws on her own correspondence with Hughes and on previously unpublished material from original manuscripts. She examines Hughes' own beliefs, as expressed in his extensive prose writing and, she discusses many of Hughes' poems in detail.

Illustrations from alchemical manuscripts and from the works of William Blake

complement the text. There is also an informative bibliography, an index of poems and a good general index.

“I was highly impressed by the thorough and penetrating account of the poems concerned. It showed me that my own reading of them had been very shallow indeed. The grasp of both local details and of the broader conception of each book in turn convinced me utterly”. (Extract from a letter to the author from Christopher Reid, former Poetry Editor at Faber and Faber Ltd., Ted Hughes’ British publishers)

This book is currently out of print but a few copies are still available from the author (e-mail: ann@skea.com). It can also be read on these pages as an e-book

© Ann Skea 2021. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea’s Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and ‘The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown’

© Ann Skea.

Sylvia Plath famously described Ted Hughes to her mother as wearing always the same black jacket, its pockets ‘full of poems, fresh trout and horoscopes’¹. The casting of horoscopes was a shared interest amongst Ted’s friends at Cambridge, and whilst for most of them it was a curiosity, something they might impress the girls with, for Ted it was more serious. He regarded astrology as an art, rather than a science, but he investigated it thoroughly and became expert in it, and he was fascinated by the mythology in which it is steeped². Whether or not he believed in it absolutely is hard to tell, but he was superstitious and his letters show how often he urged his editors to ensure that his books were published on dates when the stars were propitious. Now, a poem discovered in a collection of rare books recently donated to Hughes Hall College, Cambridge, suggests that he may well have contemplated taking on the mantle of John Dee as astrologer to the Royal Family.

Writing to his Aunt Hilda, in February 1985, Ted said that he had been asked by The Sunday Times to write a christening poem for Prince William³. The poem, ‘A Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown: What the Starry Heavens Sang to His Royal Highness Prince William On 21st July 1982’, was written some months before Ted became Poet Laureate and Ted decided not to publish it whilst John Betjeman was alive. It eventually appeared in 1987, in *Four Poets for St. Magnus*, edited by George Mackay Brown and published by Breckness Press, Stromness, Orkney, as a limited edition of 100 books. Only 85 of these books were for sale. The poem was not included amongst the Laureate poems in *Raincharm for a Duchy*, nor does it appear in *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*.

Like at least three of the poems Ted wrote for the Royal Family, 'The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown', takes the form of a Court Masque. And whilst other Laureate poems refer simply to astrological birth signs in the Royal birth-charts, this poem describes the Prince's horoscope in detail. It also conjures the gods of the Zodiac to appear and gives them voice. Just as Prospero calls forth Ceres, Iris and Juno 'from their confines to enact [his] present fancies' (The Tempest IV: 1) and to bless the union of Miranda and Ferdinand by their presence, so Ted commands

Sun and Moon and all their family stand
Around an [sic] new-born babe, in England.

One by one the Sun and Moon and Planets appear, speak their parts and present the gifts they bring 'For one born to be King'.

The whole poem is a masterpiece of compression, dealing with Prince William's horoscope in such a way that any competent astrology can reconstruct it. It also makes comparisons with the birth-charts of several other Royals, from Queen Elizabeth I to the present Queen, in a way which makes it clear that Ted had detailed knowledge of these charts. Above all, it is a wonderfully vivid, amusing and lyrical drama, which is played out around the Prince's cradle as each of his 'high godparents' speaks according to his or her particular character, and offers gifts and advice according to their own mythological and astrological strengths and weaknesses.

First to appear is the Sun. He is Lord of Light and Life, and together with the Moon he is the most important of the celestial spheres. Speaking from his position in the sign of Cancer, in triplets full of light, beauty and authority, he describes the Cancerian moon-energies which will govern the Prince's life, bringing imagination, secret storms and calms, and empathy and sorrow for the suffering of others. And he calls on the Moon to guard and crown the Prince's Spirit in such a way that 'the jewel of England's dream' may be lifted out of darkness into light.

Cancer, in the earliest mythologies, was known as 'The Gate of Man', the threshold to incarnation of the human soul. As in Ted's poem, it is associated with the 'Cosmic Ocean' and is, therefore linked to the Moon and to the Primordial Mother. In Greek mythology, it is the brave, perhaps foolhardy, Crab which bit Heracles's toe and hindered him in his battle with the Lernaean Hydra. Hera, the Great Mother Goddess (one form of the Primordial Goddess who in Ted's poem is 'half mother, half coils / The Serpent of Enigma' which guards the 'Spirit's birth') is so pleased by the Crab's defence of her serpent-headed creature that she rewards it with immortality amongst the Zodiac stars.

At home in sea and sky, brave but also vulnerable, secreting itself in its shell for protection and also to conserve its power, the Crab demonstrates all the Cancerian energies which imbue the Prince's horoscope. All this, the Sun describes as blessing and warning.

Then, 'with solemn, heavenly clang', the planets Neptune, Ouranos and 'old Pluto' sing

a dour, heavy and cynical chorus, which punctuates the rest of the poem like a comic interlude. As the last and most distant planets to be discovered, these three are often left out of astrological charts and, since astrology developed before their known existence, their significance is disputed. Ted captures their slow-moving, ponderous voices as they sing of 'sceptical English folk' and 'Astrologues', and wish that these doubters find, respectively, greater faith and more certainty 'about us'.

Next to appear is the Moon. Her voice, as she speaks as 'throned Queen' from the Sun's side in Cancer, is lyrical and full of love. She is the most gentle 'mother of mothers' as she speaks of the Prince's own mother 'who bear's my name'. She speaks, too, of Queen Victoria, who, like both Princess Diana and the Prince, shared her 'crescent of promise' in their horoscopes. But she is also firm and motherly in her advice to the Prince. 'I am the sea in your heart', she tells the sleeping baby, but also, 'Mother of all the blood's unbroken horses'. To be truly powerful and successful, she tells him, you must 'mount the throne of yourself', yoke these wild horses and put them to work.

Following another ponderous appearance of the three-planet heavenly chorus, Mercury arrives at the Prince's cradle. Mercury, mythological messenger of the gods, guide of the soul, trickster and joker, has, in Ted's poem, the 'humorous quick eye of Charles the Second'. Charles, winking and smiling, speaks with avuncular humour, and his sharp-witted advice is both literate and riddling. He predicts 'a gymnast's wit' for the Prince, 'supersensitive' senses and intuitive ability; and he ends by offering 'Stoat's Tails and the Salmon of the Dee' as a necessary restorative when the exercising of these abilities leave the Prince 'feeling whacked'. Stoat's Tails might suggest the swift, mercurial, disappearance of a stoat down a rabbit hole, or, perhaps, the black tails on the stoat's snowy winter coat which, worn as ermine, symbolizes royalty and justice. Salmon-fishing enthusiasts, however, will recognize Stoat's Tails as a very beautiful fishing fly which, according to one authority, has the sort of 'piss-em-off' patterns that will tempt even the most reluctant salmon to bite⁴: a perfect example of mercurial trickery.

Yet, there is more to Charles the Second's appearance as Mercury in this poem than his mercurial humour. The planet Mercury, in the Prince's birth-chart, is in the astrological sign of Gemini, The Twins, which is also the star-sign under which Charles the Second was born. Who better, then, to advise the Prince of the influence which Gemini might exert in his life, than this royal ancestor?

The gymnastic wit with which Charles blesses the Prince, is the skill of the mythological Gemini twin, Polydeuces (Pollux), who is described in the Iliad as 'the hardy boxer' (Iliad 3:283). But the gift which Charles brings from the second twin is not that of the Greek, Castor, but of the much older Assyrian/Babylonian twin god, Nebo (or Nabu), who, like Mercury, was patron of artists and scribes, and god of communication. It is Nebo who can give the Prince the skill of the 'exact word', and the intuitive ability to 'pick up the lunar inkling' ('inkling' having an appropriate echo of the inky world of the god of scribes). Nebo, too, as son of the Fish Goddess, Nina (Nana), probably knew a great deal about fishing lures; and about penetrating the mercurial meniscus of water to reach

the hidden treasure, an occupation which is closely linked to creativity, intuition and exploration of the subconscious in Ted's River poem, 'Go Fishing'⁵.

The planet, Venus, is next to offer her gifts but she is the only god in this poem who does not speak. In mythology, she is the Goddess Venus – Aphrodite – Ishtar – Innana, the Goddess of Love and Fertility. The Mysteries, which were always associated with her, are suggested in the poem by a reference to her 'sacred books'. Now, she bows down from her position in the constellation of Taurus, where she is situated, so Ted tells us, in exactly the same position as she was at the birth of Prince William's mother. The odds against this, he notes, are 'three five nine to one'. Venus is the brightest star in the sky and, astrologically, the position she occupied at the Prince's birth is considered exceptionally lucky. So, 'Our Royal Lad' is smothered with 'Luck from the moment he starts'. As 'Queen of Hearts, and of Art' and 'Queen of the May', Venus offers exceptional bounty, good fortune and good looks, but the dangers of such an excess of luck are hinted at in the poem, too. The Prince may have 'the Luck of the Devil', but a certain amount of games-playing is suggested in this phrase as well as a connection with the Devil who, in mythology, symbolizes the most basic a-moral instincts. So, the Prince must be careful to use his luck wisely. Only 'lit with Her grace' will he 'grow' to the potential the Goddess promises in her sacred books.

Mars's gifts are more straightforward. His voice is military and direct. He growls that 'strength is forged in conflict' and offers 'some ding-dong' to strengthen the Prince's character. Impatient with the 'supercharged' excess of Venus's 'mother's love', he intends, he says, to 'cross that wiring' by giving the Prince 'sheer, bodily energy'. Such balance is appropriate and possible here, because Mars is positioned in the constellation of Libra in the Prince's horoscope. For astrologers, however, such a position suggests some discord and a weakening of Mars's energies. Mars commands the Prince to 'Resolve those discords' and warns of the 'hard riddles' they will pose. But he promises that, 'in time', balance will be achieved and 'all shall witness / Great strength of self-knowledge, great sweetness'.

Next to speak by the Prince's cradle is Saturn. He, too, was situated in Libra at the Prince's birth, but for him this is a powerful position. In spite of this, he seems to feel the need to dignify himself, perhaps because in his own Golden Age the gods were known and honoured, whilst now, in our scientific Age of Iron, they are derided or forgotten. Perhaps, too, because of the gross indignities he suffered in antiquity, when he was dethroned by his son, Jupiter, and allegedly castrated by him, too. So, demonstrating that he has kept up to date with technology, he refers to 'computer research' and to 'that Frenchman, Ganquelin'. Michael Ganquelin (1928-91) spent a lifetime doing extensive statistical analyses of the horoscopes of people in particular professions, and his research showed a significant correlation between the planets present at birth and the life-choices these people had made⁶. According to these modern statistics, says Saturn, 'under my rule' 'the boy' will be a scientist. At the same time, he wryly points out that it doesn't take statistics to prove the he, Saturn, 'evidently does exist'.

Saturn is the oldest of the gods and Ted calls him 'grave Saturn', suggesting his

weighty, serious nature and also his connection with time, mortality and death. Now, like the father-figure he is, Saturn sombrely reviews the gifts the other gods have given to the Prince and, noting that 'it goes without saying that he'll fight and learn from his scars', he provides him with 'a firm seat in the saddle – a judgment seat' from which to rule all these disparate energies. Balance, Saturn states firmly, is the 'true dance' of the Solar System. And he ends his speech with the very Libran image of the Prince balancing 'all contrary forces / Easy as the fulcrum on a pair of scales'.

Another chorus from the outer planets follows Saturn's speech. Then Jupiter takes his place beside the cradle. His first words are aimed at Saturn, showing that the old enmity between them still exists. He is dismissive of the findings of 'Frenchman and computer', and arrogantly boasts of his old victory over Saturn by declaring himself 'Lord of the Winning Game'. Lord, too, he claims, of 'Abundance and Magnificence', 'Nobility, Good Cheer and Good Fame'. He, Jupiter, now occupies 'Heaven's own throne' in the most powerful position in Midheaven on 'the Cusp of the Scorpion'. He was there, too, he says, for the birth of 'the first renowned Elizabeth', for King George the Sixth and for the 'Great Victoria'. He concludes, therefore, that he crowns a 'Zodiac of coincidence' in which he holds the Fixed Stars in submission and is blessed by the 'conjunct Sun and Moon'. Carried away by his own importance, he deigns to acknowledge the support of 'wise-father' Saturn, whose presence, he concedes, crowns the horoscope of our present queen.

Arrogant as Jupiter is, his exact position in the Prince's horoscope is regarded by astrologers as extremely propitious. Appropriately, Ted separates the final line of Jupiter's speech from the boastful excesses of his claims and lets it stand alone so that his propitious energies, together with those of the other gods, who do indeed support him in this horoscope, can 'Blaze' unhindered 'above this cradle of Succession'.

Now, their gifts given and their advice offered, the gods gather together ‘as one’ and gaze in delight at each other, ‘Hardly able to credit what they have done’. And, with a final ‘echoing clang’, Neptune, Ouranos and Pluto sing their closing chorus and repeat for the last time their magical incantation:

Let all sceptic English folk this night
Cease to doubt us
Let all Astrologues be almost right
About us.

So ends Ted's poetic blessing of Prince William. It is clear that he enjoyed creating an entertaining drama suitable for a Royal occasion, and equally clear that his study of astrology and his expertise in it was extensive. What remains to be seen, is whether the gifts which astrologers believe the heavens bestowed on Prince William at his birth have shaped his character and will shape his life.

NOTE: Both the facsimile manuscript and the printed version of the poem in Four Poets for St. Magnus give the birth date of His Highness Prince William as 21st July 1982.

This is incorrect. The astrological information in the poem, however, is correct for the actual date and time of his birth, which was 21st June 1982 at 9.03 pm. Prince William was Christened on 4th August.

I am grateful to Neil Spencer, author of *True as the Stars Above*, for his expert advice on the astrology in this poem. I would also like to thank the President and the Librarian at Hughes Hall for allowing me access to material which is, as yet, uncatalogued.

REFERENCES

1. Plath, S. *Letters Home*, Faber, 1999. p.243.
2. In his review of Louis MacNeice's *Astrology* in 1964, Ted wrote that "it doesn't matter" whether astrology is an intuitive art or a science "so long as it works" (Winter Pollen, Faber, 1994. p.51).
3. Reid, C. (Ed.). *Letters of Ted Hughes*, Faber, 2007. p.497.
4. Craig Moore, *The Fly Fishing Shop*, Morden, Surrey, England.
5. Ted Hughes: *Collected Poems*, Faber, 2003. p 652.
6. Neil Spencer discussed Ganquelin's work in *True as the Stars Above*, Victor Gollancz, London, 2000. pp.94-6.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options.](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional
Ted Hughes and the British Bardic Tradition
Symposium Paper, University of Cairo, December, 1994.

© Ann Skea

The British Bardic tradition is extremely old. The earliest historical records of it were made by the Romans who invaded Britain just over 2000 years ago, but the British Celtic culture which they describe, and within which the Bards assumed great importance, was at that time already ancient.

The Celts originated in Central Europe in the early Bronze Age. Long before they or the Romans arrived in Britain, Celtic society had become rich and well organised and its people renowned as warriors and horsemen, and also as skilful artists and orators. It was the orators, or Bards, who were responsible for the oral preservation and transmission of the language, history, genealogies and spiritual wisdom of each Celtic tribe. Embodied in the myths and legends which they recounted was the accumulated knowledge of the Celtic race, and it is some of these myths and legends which still survive in the native literature of the oldest Celtic parts of the British Isles – Ireland and Wales. These were the areas, along with a few other isolated parts such as Cornwall and West Yorkshire, to which the Celts retreated during the Roman invasion, and it was from here that the Celtic revival spread throughout the country when the Romans left.

This native Bardic literature was first written down during early Christian times in Britain, some 1400 years ago. Robert Graves, in the first chapter of *The White Goddess* (Graves 1977), describes the ways in which the stories were changed in order to conform to Christian orthodoxies and sensitivities, and the way in which pagan Bardic traditions survived thereafter amongst the wandering minstrels whose poetry was not subject to the Church's strictures. Recent work by Welsh scholar, John Matthews (1991), however, shows that even the Church-influenced Celtic writings still retain a valuable core of information about pre-Christian Celtic beliefs and, especially, about the Bards who created them. In particular, Matthews' study of the surviving works of Taliesin, 'Primary Chief Bard of the Island of Britain', provides us with details of the special knowledge and powers of the early Bards and allows us to see just how closely the present Poet Laureate of Great Britain, Ted Hughes, follows in their Bardic footsteps.

In the earliest Celtic tribes, the Bards were chosen from amongst the ruling aristocracy. They were part of the learned class of priests, teachers and judges who were known as 'Druids', and their training as Master Bards was long and arduous. Roman historians write of Bardic schools where the 'singers and poets' undertook up to twenty years of training (Matthews 1991, 120-3). Ted Hughes, introducing a poetry reading in 1988, spoke of these schools for poets as "the first colleges in the British Isles, for centuries the only colleges" and he described them as "Druidic or religious colleges" from which the graduating Bard, or fili (this Irish Celtic word means 'seer') emerged "second in rank only to the king" and, ideally, carrying "the whole culture of the people".

Irish filid(pl.) are known to have studied for twelve years, learning by heart at least 300 poetic metres, 250 primary stories and 100 secondary stories (Matthews 1991, 78-80, 128). By the end of this period, a fili also understood the secret bardic alphabets; he was knowledgeable about the stars and about nature; he was expected to compose orations for the tribal chief extolling his deeds and virtues, and he was held in awe because of his power to use satires against his enemies and thereby to inflict loss of reputation, sickness or even death. The satires which are usually quoted as having been effective often sound more like thorough cursings. The Bard Nede, for example, is reputed to have unjustly satirised King Caier with these words:

Evil, death and a short life to Caier
May spears of battle slay Caier
The rejected of the land and the earth is Caier
Beneath the mounds and the rocks be Caier.

Whereupon, Caier developed three colourful blisters on his face – a crimson one called 'disgrace', a green one called 'blemish' and a white one called 'defect'. Because a Celtic King had to be blemish-free, Caier was forced into exile where he eventually died of shame².

Understandably, there were complicated rules and rituals which had to be observed before a satire could be pronounced. Prohibitions against the use of satires or lampoons were eventually enforced and these existed in Britain until about 600 years ago, but the magical power of the Bard as a "weaver of spells" whose words influenced those who

heard them has always been widely acknowledged.

Ted Hughes, who also believes in the “magical” power of poetry to “make things happen the way that you want them to happen”³, tells us that “tradition dwells on the paranormal, clairvoyant, somewhat magical powers” of the Bards, and that the fili was “the curator and re-animator of the inner life which held the people together and made them what they were”. In Taliesin’s own words we hear, “I am gifted with a perceptive spirit”, “Clearly shall I prophecy”⁴, “I am a guide, I am a judge”⁵, “I am a wise man of the primal knowledge”⁶ and “I received the muse/ From Ceridwen’s cauldron”⁷. Ceridwen, the Celtic Goddess of Inspiration and Poetry was the source of Awen, or divine inspiration. Through this, like the Shaman in many tribal cultures, the inspired Bard had access to inner wisdom and truth:

Be silent, unwise bards
Who speak only in rhyme,
Who cannot judge
Between truth and falsehood.
If you are primary bards
Formed in the Land of Promise
Tell your king his fate.
It is I, who am a diviner
And an inspired bard,
Who will do so.⁸

Thus proclaimed Taliesin. We know that Taliesin would have worn the Master Bard’s crimson cloak of birds’ feathers which was very like a shaman’s cape. And we know that he, like the shaman who journeys to the Otherworld in animal form or accompanied by animal guides, could also take on many shapes and could journey through time. “I have been a sow”, he tells us, “I have been a cat with a speckled head on three trees”, “I shall be until the day of doom on the face of the earth/Nor is it known if my body is flesh or fish”⁹, and, “Whoever shall hear my bardic books/Shall find sanctuary in the Otherworld”¹⁰.

John Matthews, makes a very strong case in his book for the shamanic nature of the Celtic Bards’ calling, and it is this shamanic role which is the most important aspect of Ted Hughes’ inheritance of the British Bardic tradition. Hughes has spoken and written often of the access to the inner world of the spirit which shaman and poets share. He has called the shamanic flight “one of the main regeneration dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event”¹¹, and it is the regenerative power of the shaman/poet’s flight which is of utmost importance to him, being the means by which he has consistently sought to counter the divisions and the sterility which he sees in our world and to restore it to wholeness.

In Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest (Skea 1994), I have examined the way in which Hughes has pursued this shamanic, healing purpose over the years and how this is fundamental to his three major poetic sequences, Cave Birds, Remains of Elmet, and River (Hughes 1978, 1979, 1983), which have recently been republished in paperback

by Faber and Faber as Three Books. Here, I will discuss only Remains of Elmet and River, because these exemplify not only the regenerative purpose of Hughes' work, but also many other ways in which Hughes carries on the British Bardic tradition.

Ted Hughes was born in a part of the British Isles which "for centuries", as he tells us, "was considered a more or less uninhabited wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hideout for refugees"(Hughes 1979, ROE.Preface). This was the ancient Celtic kingdom of Elmet in West Yorkshire – the "Badlands where outcast and outlaw/ Fortified the hill-knowle's long outlook"(ROE.p.90) and where, because of the wild landscape and harsh weather, the warrior Celts continued to flourish whilst Romans, Picts, Scots, Angles, Saxons and Teutons fought over the rest of Britain. Eventually the Brigante tribe of this area was subdued by the Angles, and later the Viking "longships got this far"(ROE.90), but few invaders settled here and Celtic influence remained strong. Commenting on this region, Hughes has said that the "peculiar conditions and history, had its Darwinian effects on the natives"(Hughes 1993, 182), and he believes that nature and history have shaped the character of the people of this area in a unique way. This is Hughes' own heritage, and the language of this area – the oral heritage embodied in the distinctive dialect of West Yorkshire – has influenced him especially. In an interview in 1970, he told Ekbert Faas:

Whatever other speech you grow up into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. It makes some things more difficult... since it's your childhood self there inside the dialect and that is possibly your real self or the core of it. Some things it makes easier. Without it, I doubt if I would ever have written verse.(Faas 1980, 202)

So, Hughes was born into a culture with strong Celtic ties and whose chief local deity happened to be Brigid, the Goddess of Poetry. She, like Robert Graves' White Goddess, was also a nature goddess who embodied the triple roles of wife, mother and layer-out of the dead. And Hughes invokes her, and the mother elements – air, fire, earth and water – in the first poem of Remains of Elmet, 'Where the mothers'(ROE.10), to establish the atmosphere of primal chaos from which the soul of Elmet may yet be reborn.

Whatever other purpose Hughes had for writing Remains of Elmet, it is also his Bardic record of the tribal history of Elmet. His prefatory poem tells of the "archaeology of the mouth", the "last inheritance" of the tribal dream which is brought to him by his elderly uncle's reminiscences, but on such "a frayed, fraying hair-fineness" of breath that

Any moment now, a last kick
And the dark river will fold it away.(ROE.Preface)

The tribal dreams come to him, too, from the "indigenous memories"(ROE.89) of the old people— "singers of a lost kingdom", whose "yarning" in "the authentic tones/The reverberations of their fathers", makes "mesmerising music".

Yet this is not a linear history. The cyclical patterns of nature pervade the sequence.

The moors of Elmet are but a “stage for the performance of heaven”(ROE.19), a place where Brigid’s magical “witch-brew boiling in the sky-vat” still “spins electric terrors/In the eyes of sheep”, and where human history is “incidental”. Wars, religion and industry repeat themselves in the poems just as they have been repeated in time so that this becomes a poetic recreation of the interwoven energies which have made the area and its people what they are. The cycles of history and nature are universal, but the failure of Elmet’s people to grow beyond the materialistic focus of their lives, or to see themselves as part of the natural world which they plunder and destroy, is shown by Hughes to have been their downfall. Remains of Elmet, in this way, becomes a parable through which Hughes, like a bardic “wise man of the primal knowledge” attempts to teach us our place in the natural world and to warn us of the dangers of arrogantly assuming (as the people of Elmet did) that we can control it.

River, the illustrated poetic sequence which followed Remains of Elmet, is probably the most rich, complex and (in Hughes’ terms) successful of all his poetic sequences. It embodies the accumulated knowledge and experience of his lifelong poetic/Shamanic quest for interaction with the source energies, and the imaginative power of its poetry channels these energies into our world in a controlled and creative way. It is also the poetic sequence in which Hughes makes the most extensive use of his Celtic heritage.

As well as being the Goddess of Poetry, Brigid was always widely associated with healing and fertile waters in rivers and wells. She is present throughout River where, like all nature goddesses, she is seen as both fickle and subtle, sensuous and evil, young and old: two-faced like her description in the Celtic stories where “one side of her face was ugly, but the other side was very comely”(Gregory 1970, 28). Personified in the river she is “a juicy bride”, “a beautiful idle woman” dreaming of a “love-potion” to seduce her lover to “copulation and death”(R.p.88), or else she is an evil witch creating “blood-dark”, “sick-bed darkness” with her “hemlock and nettle and alder and oak”(R.76). She is a “brown musically-moving beauty”, a lithe daughter “remorselessly” fleeing her bleeding Earth-father(R.106), or a welcoming “grandmotherly” spirit whose reassuring presence nevertheless exudes “a fishy nostalgia” for a sultry exotic past(R.102). She is also the mother earth whose breasts are the hills which “nurse the river’s plumpness”(R.30), and whose son, like a sacrificed god “fallen from heaven, lies across” her lap(R.74) as in a pieta.

The Goddess is embodied, too, in the plants and in many of the river creatures. But the river creatures, more than anything else, act as Shamanic guides for Hughes, drawing him through the sliding “water mirror” meniscus of the river’s surface into the deep, fluid Otherworld of imagination. Salmon, in particular, serve this function in River, and salmon were always regarded with special reverence by the Celts as being the source of wisdom and inspiration. One story tells of the Irish Celtic Goddess Boand (also one of the Patronesses of Poetry) who is blinded by the light of Inspiration when she looks into Nechtan’s Well. Because of her blindness the well overflows and becomes the River Boyne in which the salmon swim, so, the salmon imbibe Inspiration. Another story tells of the Nine Hazels of Poetic Wisdom which overhang a well into which their nuts drop to be eaten by the salmon. For the Celts, the brink of water where the Salmon of Wisdom

might be caught became a place where poetry was revealed, and eating the flesh of the Salmon or “the trout who stand in for the Salmon of Wisdom”(Matthews 1991, 190-1) was the way in which many Celtic heroes gained their special knowledge.

In *River*, Hughes clearly shares the Celtic reverence for these fish, describing them as “imperishable fish”, “king[s] of infinite liberty”, “the holy ones”; and the October Salmon, in the “epic poise” of its final vigil, is a “death-patched hero”(R.110-4). Whilst the river’s water is “the source”, “the generator”, “the power line”, “a chrism of birth”, “the medicinal mercury creature”(R.16), and Hughes soaks up its energies “through every membrane/As if the whole body were a craving mouth”(R.56), it is through his encounters with the fish that he enters the Otherworld. In ‘Go Fishing’(R.42), Hughes not only gives us a clear description of a Shamanic journey, he also directs us imaginatively through the process step-by-step:

Go Fishing
Join water, wade into underbeing
Let brain mist into moist earth
Ghost loosen downstream
Gulp river and gravity
Loose words
Cease

...

By the time we reach the end of the poem, ready to “Heal into time and other people”, we have been taught how to undertake this magical, ritual transformation for ourselves.

Other creatures of Celtic myth inhabit the river banks. A heron, like “a parasol broken/Tumbles up into the sky”(R.20), an otter “sheds” its “pad-clusters on mud margins”(R.116), a fox, a wren and two owls make brief appearances. And spreading their heady perfumes throughout this river epic are the Goddess’s plants – the witches’ Hemlock, the Honeysuckle, Foxglove and Dogrose, the “nightfall pall of balsam”(R.96), and the Hawthorn, “hiding its thorns/With too much and too fleshy perfume”(R.20). The Hawthorn, in particular, is the Goddess’s plant and it has always had strong associations in British folklore with female sexuality and death. Even as little as thirty years ago, my own grandmother would not allow “unlucky” Hawthorn blossoms in her house.

Not only does the content of the *River* poems draw on ancient Celtic myth, but the shape of the sequence itself also shows this influence. One of the most important roles of the ancient Celtic Bard was to use his knowledge of astronomy to determine the times at which the major annual events of the Celtic calendar should take place. The Celtic year, like ours, was divided into four seasons, each of which had its own associated rituals, myths and festivals. As Hughes’ *River* poems follow the river through its annual cycles, he, too, undertakes the rituals, tells the myths and celebrates the appropriate festivals.

The opening poem of the original British publication of *River* (‘That Morning Before

Christmas'), for example, describes a modern fertility ritual, the milking of salmon for eggs and sperm, which exactly parallels primitive rituals designed to ensure the renewal of life after the deathly cold of winter. 'Japanese River Tales'(R.14) and 'Creation of Fishes'(R.54) are beautiful myths for the winter season of Samhain and the summer season of Beltain. In 'Milesian Encounter of the Sligachan' and in 'Gulkana', Hughes re-enacts the mythical hero's encounter with the primitive forces of darkness in eerie confrontations with "a Medusa", "Some Boggart"(R.48), his "doppelganger other"(R.80). And in 'Night Arrival of Sea Trout'(R.68), just at the season when the Celts would have celebrated the harvest festival of Lughnasad, Hughes evokes the horned Celtic god, Cocius, who erupts from the dark, "upside-down buried heaven" of the river into "the hard corn... Running and leaping/With a bat in his drum".

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Hughes is linked to the Bardic tradition of Britain is through his appointment by the leader of the tribe – Queen Elizabeth II – as Poet Laureate. Although this title was only bestowed for the first time in the reign of King Charles II, on John Dryden, the honorary nature of the position, the fact that the appointment is made by the reigning monarch and that the Laureate's duties are to celebrate royal occasions, all show it to be similar to the role of Master Bard.

Hughes certainly takes his duties seriously. His Laureate poems, collected in *Rain-charm for the Duchy*(Hughes 1992), show him weaving Celtic British myth into the historical and geographical matrix of the British Isles in such a way as to link the present Monarchy with the earliest mythical rulers of the land. In his notes to these poems, Hughes describes the Queen as "head of the English Church...exactly as the kings and queens of the earlier world were the earthly representatives of whatever god or goddess represented the spiritual unity of whatever religion then prevailed". He links her, too, with Shakespeare's King Lear, "the only King of British legendary history who was originally a god – the [Celtic] Welsh sea-god Llyr"(Hughes 1992, 54). And it is clear from these notes that Hughes purpose in making such links is wholly Shamanic, for the link between the Crown and God has always been essential to the spiritual health of the people. As Hughes puts it:

A Soul is a wheel
A Nation's a Soul
With a Crown at the hub
To keep it whole.

Hughes uses all his poetic powers in the Laureate poems to promote this wholeness.

Hughes, of course, was not born into a Celtic aristocracy, for one no longer exists. Nor are there any Bardic colleges, apart from the Arvon Foundation which Hughes helped to set up as a "school for poets" in 1971¹². Nevertheless, Hughes' extensive and wide-ranging reading, his years of practical experience and his constant quest for wholeness – for integration of the spiritual and material aspects of human nature – have given him an exceptionally deep understanding of his art. He knows well the techniques and intricacies of poetic music, as his recently published essay on 'sprung rhythm' in the work of Hopkins and Coleridge clearly shows(Hughes 1994, 310-465). And he has very

many of the other attributes which were once required of a Celtic Master Bard.

Were Taliesin to return and to challenge Hughes, as he once challenged the bards at the court of Maelgwn Gwynedd(Matthews 1991, 18, 289-91), setting them verse riddles and bidding them “be silent” unless they knew “the names of verse-forms” and “the distinction between truth and falsehood”¹³, I think Hughes would be well equipped for the contest. And he, like Taliesin, may well be able to trace his Bardic lineage back to the Morfran, Black-Crow(Matthews 1991, 24-30), son of Ceridwen, the Goddess of Inspiration.

ENDNOTES

1. “The Song of Songs in the Valley of Bones”, Introduction to a reading of The Waste Land at the Palace Theatre, London, 25th. Sept. 1988. (Hughes 1992, 12).
2. The full story of Caire’s cursing is told by Matthews (1991, 140-1).
3. This was said by Hughes in a tape recording made for The Critical Forum Series (1978).
4. Taliesin’s poem ‘Cad Goddeau’. (Matthews 1991, 300).
5. ‘Taliesin’s Bardic Lore’. (Matthews 1991, 303).
6. Taliesin’s poem ‘The Hostile Confederacy’. (Matthews 1991, 102).
7. Taliesin’s poem ‘Primary Chief Bard am I’. (Matthews 1991, 285).
8. Taliesin’s poem ‘The Rebuke of the Bards’. (Matthews 1991, 111).
9. Quotations from various poems by Taliesin (Matthews 1991, 42).
10. ‘Taliesin’s Bardic Lore’. (Matthews 1991, 304).
11. From Hughes’ 1964 Listener review of Mircea Eliade’s Shamanism (Eliade 1964), now reprinted in Winter Pollen (Hughes 1994, 58).
12. The Arvon Foundation was the invention of John Fairfax and John Moat who approached Hughes for support. Some fourteen apprentice writers live and work for a week with two well-known, published authors, gaining help and inspiration from such interaction. Its courses take place at Lumb bank, a mill-owner’s house in Hebden bridge, Yorkshire and at Totleigh Barnes, a cottage in Devon.
13. Taliesin’s poem ‘The Rebuke of the Bards’. (Matthews 1991, 290).

WORKS CITED

Faas, E. (1980). *The Unaccommodated Universe*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press.

Graves, R. (1977). *The White Goddess*, London: Faber and Faber.

Gregory, Lady. (1970). *Gods and Fighting Men*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe.

Hughes, T. (1992). "The Song of Songs in the Valley of Bones." *A Dancer to God: Tributes to T.S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hughes, T. (1978). *Tape Recording*. The Critical Forum Series: Norwich Tapes Ltd.

Hughes, T. (1994). "Regenerations." *Winter Pollen*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hughes, T. (1978). *Cave Birds*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hughes, T. (1979). *Remains of Elmet*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hughes, T. (1983). *River*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hughes, T. (1993). *Three Books*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hughes, T. (1992). *Rain-charm for a Duchy*. London: Faber and Faber.

Matthews, J. (1991). *Taliesin*, London: The Aquarian Press.

Skea, A. (1994). *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*. Armidale NSW: University of New England Press.

© Ann Skea, 2001. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional [Wolf-Masks: From Hawk to Wolfwatching](#).

© Ann Skea

First published in Scigaj, L (Ed.), *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes*, G.K.Hall & Co, New York, 1992.

Of all the symbols which Hughes uses, the wolf is almost unique in the lasting power of its attraction for him, in the ambiguity of its nature as he describes it, and in the way in which he extends the scope of its symbolism from personal to universal applicability.

Hughes's wolves embody the contradictory qualities of the natural energies: they have beauty of form, an economical directness of function, the instinctive voracity of appetite for which wolves are renowned, and a predatory cunning which has allowed them to survive in the harshest of environments. It is no surprise, therefore, that Hughes's latest book of poetry should be called *Wolfwatching*.

In many ways *Wolfwatching* sums up the major concerns of Hughes's artistic career. It deals with the natural energies in all their complexity, and it repeatedly shows the distortion of these energies which humans have brought about both in animals (like the caged wolf and the macaw) and in themselves. Adopting the wolf mask, which has long been one of his shamanic guises, Hughes looks again at the familiar features of his world, and records once more in his poetry the paradoxical combination of beauty and horror which, for him, defines the natural energies.

Appropriately, the 18th century netsuke which adorns the cover of *Wolfwatching*, conveys just such paradoxical energies. The crafty, falsely humble attitude of the figure, which stands, human-like, on two legs just as fairy-story wolves do, belies the natural predatory instincts of the creature. Both the benign and the predatory aspects of the wolf, however, are described in the title poem, which forms a pivotal node to the book – a sort of wolf-lair from which Hughes makes hunting forays into his world to capture the poem-animals which he once described in *Poetry in the Making*.¹

In the *Wolfwatching* poems, Hughes, now an old wolf, looks again at the creatures and people that have been so important to him. The distancing effect of time has allowed him to look more closely at members of his family than he has been able to do before and the emotions aroused are often painfully intense, but the clarity of his vision is expressed in the poems with all the knowledge, skill and power of his maturity. His vision extends over a historical panorama which extends from 'A Sparrow Hawk', in which he looks again at the hawks of his earliest poetry, to 'A Dove', which depicts the turbulent and varied emotions of love that colour the poems throughout this present book.

Hughes's choice of the wolf as a poetic mask is not new, and it is one which connects *Wolfwatching* with some of his earliest and most enduring beliefs. Mircea Eliade, in his study of Shamanism², wrote that "the Shaman is indispensable in any ceremony³ that concerns the experiences of the human soul", and from Hughes's own discussions about his poetry it is obvious that he regards poetry as just such a ceremony. Hughes believes that poetry gives access to the world of the spirit, and that certain powerful poetic symbols (like Blake's Tiger, and Yeats's "rough beast" in 'The Second Coming') have a summoning force which invokes what he calls "the elemental power circuit of the Universe."⁴ Using the rhythms of his poetry like a shaman's magic drum, Hughes, too, uses symbolic creatures to summon these powerful energies. He contains their potentially dangerous powers within the framework of his poems, and "flies" with them to the world of imagination and spirit for the healing that he finds there.⁵

In the undertaking of these poetic/shamanic journeys, Hughes's creatures not only have

summoning powers, they frequently serve, also, as his shamanic costume. Eliade writes that “the Shaman’s costume tends to give the Shaman a new, magical body in animal form.”⁶ It is a “mask” through which the shaman is “transubstantiated... into a superhuman being”⁷ in order to undertake his journey. In *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes instructs aspiring young poets to “imagine what you are writing about... Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it.”⁸ and ‘The Thought Fox’⁹ was, perhaps, the first of his published poems to demonstrate (and describe) his own use of this masking procedure. It is a technique which Hughes adopts quite frequently, and one animal mask with which he has particular affinities and through which he has sometimes expressed some very personal emotions is that of the wolf.

To Hughes, the instinctive, predatory, wild energies that wolves exemplify are part of our own nature: they are part of the uncivilised prehistoric inheritance which is still present in our instincts and emotions¹⁰. Such fecund energies connect us with our roots and feed our imagination, balancing our rationality and our “sophistries” (‘Egg-Head’)¹¹, and so, Hughes believes, they are necessary. But suppressed and denied by our society’s mores, he believes they become threatening and dangerous.

It is wolf-energies such as these which inhabit Hughes’s poem, ‘February’ (Lupercal, 13)¹², where a ravaging dream-wolf is conjured into his protagonist’s world by a photograph of “the hairless knuckled feet / Of the last wolf killed in Britain.” For Hughes, as for his protagonist, the wolf-energies which inhabit this poem exert a powerful fascination. They may “siege all thought”, and threaten to “choose his head” as their home, but their attraction is such that no mythical or fairy-story wolves will now “suffice” him. So, Hughes, creates his own poetic wolf-masks (such as this poem) through which he can more safely allow expression to the powerful energies which fuel his imagination.

It is typical of the care with which Hughes constructs his poetic masks that the poem’s title, ‘February’, evokes the wintry bleakness into which his wolves are summoned, and also, through its Latin origin, recalls the purifying rituals of the Feralia (the festival of the dead) and the Lupercalia which were held in Rome at this time of year. Thus, through the allusive power of a single word, Hughes conveys the ambivalence which he feels in dealing with the wolf-energies, for the Lupercalia was both a purification ceremony and an invocation of fertility.

In *Lupercal*, the book of poems in which ‘February’ appears, Hughes undertakes his own celebration of the Lupercalia. All of the poems in this book are, as Hughes told Ekbert Faas, “invocations to writing”¹³. And although the title poem, ‘Lupercalia’, partly describes the ancient Roman festival, it is, more importantly, a ritual evocation of fecund brute energies and it ends with the poet’s own prayer for renewal: “Maker of the world, / Hurrying the lit ghost of man / Age to age while the body hold, / Touch this frozen one.”

‘February’, and the other poems in *Lupercalia*, celebrate the sort of wild, primitive energies that Hughes’s dream-wolf represents, but they show them as energies which have been caged, suppressed or modified by our society until they only appear in an

indirect, sterile form in “stories” or “pictures”. Just as the wolf-spirit in ‘February’ becomes a dangerous disembodied spirit which searches the world for its vanished head and “for the world/ vanished with the head”, so Hughes believes that our own brute energies, suppressed by the dictates of our society, can only precariously be held in check. Sooner or later they, like the spirit-wolf, will re-emerge with potentially dangerous consequences.

Hughes has used such savage wolf imagery before with similar implications. An earlier poem, ‘A Modest Proposal’(Hawk, 25), was written at a time when many of his poems were inspired by the new, intense relationship between himself and Sylvia Plath. In it, he writes, seemingly autobiographically: “There is no better way to know us / Than as two wolves, come separately to a wood.”¹⁴ The desire which these wolves have for each other creates a terrifying atmosphere of danger: it is an all consuming distraction in which each competes against the other for “a mad final satisfaction” which will be achieved by making “the other’s body and the whole wood... its own.”

Although the wolf is a common symbol for the predatory male in the human hunt for a mate, the female, conventionally, is a submissive, unequal partner in the game. In the relationship between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath there was no such inequality. Sylvia wrote to her mother of Ted’s effect on her: “I have never known anything like it. For the first time in my life I can use ALL of my knowing and laughing and force and writing to the hilt all the time, everything... I feel a growing strength. I do not merely idolize, I see right into the core of him.”¹⁵ And Hughes’s poetry at this period of his life celebrates the woman who does not “sweeten smiles, peep, cough”, but

... sees straight through bogeyman,
The crammed cafes, the ten thousand
Books packed end to end, even my gross bulk,
To the fiery star coming from the eye itself,
And while she can grab of them what she can.
(‘Billet-Doux’, Hawk, 24).

The dangers of such an intense relationship as theirs were apparent to both. In ‘Billet-Doux’ Hughes depicts such a relationship between equals not as love, which he describes as “a spoiled appetite for some delicacy”, but as a condition of compulsive “desperation” in which each struggles not only to possess the other, but to avoid the surrender of self. Similarly, the lovers in ‘A Modest Proposal’ are equal in their predatory intent, and the voracious violence of each wolf-like “skirmish” leaves both torn and exhausted.

In the “thicket” of these lovers’ emotions, the wren, the prophetic bird of the English god Bran, “shrieks out” in terror at its glimpsed vision of “the red smelting of hatred” which is so close beneath the surface in these two wolves. Through the bloody “rents” in the animals’ hides and the chinks of their over-bright eyes it sees the uncontrollable passions which threaten to emerge. In the light of this description of his aggressive wolf-self, the “modest proposal” which Hughes makes is an ironic self-effacement, and the link which this title-phrase makes with Jonathan Swift’s appallingly simplistic solution

to the Irish famine of 1727¹⁶, suggests the satirical nature of Hughes final stanzas and, perhaps, of the whole poem. Suggesting that the lovers may avoid disaster by substituting co-operation for competition, Hughes pictures an alternative mode of behaviour which is essentially just another mask for the voracious wolf-instincts:

And there rides by
The great lord from hunting. His embroidered
Coat floats, the tail of his horse pours,
And at his stirrup the two great-eyed greyhounds
That day after day bring down the towering stag
Leap like one, making delighted sounds.

Since Hughes and Plath were both compulsive writers of poetry (it was in a sense their “master”) it is possible to see the “great lord” of this poem as a masculine version of their poetic muse. And the stag, a creature of Cernunnos, the horned Celtic God of Fertility, also figures in some of the earliest pre-Celtic song/poems as a deity responsible for poetic inspiration. Robert Graves, for example, gives a version of the ‘Song of Amergin’ (an encrypted bardic chant which is reputed to date from at least 1268 B.C.) in which the God is both the “stag of seven tines”, and the inspiration of poets.¹⁷

The proposal that the lovers’ “wolf” natures may be tamed, controlled, and put to productive use by submission to an artificial but socially acceptable ritual, is conveyed through the formal and ornate language of Hughes’s last stanza and through the romantic and chivalric conventions that underlie the subject and content of his “picture”¹⁸. At the same time the word “proposal” hints at one ritual through which this may be achieved – namely, marriage. Hughes and Plath, of course, did marry and work together, and their co-operation was an important element in their individual poetic development and success.

Despite the conventional facade, however, the couple led an unusual and intense life until Sylvia’s suicide in February 1963. And there is little doubt that Sylvia’s death had a stunning impact on Ted Hughes, causing a hiatus in his writing which lasted for three years.

In ‘The Howling of Wolves’¹⁹, which was written within a few weeks of Sylvia’s death²⁰, Hughes adopts the wolf-mask again in a poem which is full of bleakness and anguish. The title of the poem comes from one of Blake’s ‘Proverbs of Hell’: “The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.”²¹ This proverb expresses the incomprehensible nature of the emotions and impulses which cause the anguish in Hughes’s poem.

The initial image of howling wolves “dragging” their “long leashes of sound” “up and out” of themselves into a freezing and silent forest, is cold, mournful and eerie, and the near paranomasia between “world” and “word” in the first line suggests the inexplicable enormity of their pain. The wolves’ instinctive, driven behaviour and their cold “mineral”

innocence, is sharply contrasted with the gentle, innocent warmth of the baby's cries; and the delicacy of the violin's notes, and the urgency of the wolves' hunger for such warmth is emphasised by the repetition of the word "running": "Then crying of a baby, in this forest of starving silences / Brings the wolves running. / Tuning of a violin, in this forest delicate as an owl's ear, / Brings the wolves running – ."

In the linked antitheses of the lines: the howling which "dissolves" in the silence; the "furred" steel; the small, gentle sounds which bring the wolves running – jaws "clashing and slaving"; and the attribution of innocence to these steely instruments, Hughes suggests the paradoxes of the wolves' existence. Because he believes that we, too, harbour barely controlled wolf-energies, similar paradoxes are part of the human condition. And in the slight difference between lines 11 and 12 of the poem: "That they must live like this, / That they must live," Hughes establishes two related but separate questions: that of the nature of this life, and that of the reason for life itself. The isolation of the second of these lines in the poem's text indicates the relative importance of this latter question for Hughes at this time.

In the second half of the poem, the focus narrows from that of the wolf pack to a view of a single wolf hunched and shivering in the wind. To the observer, the wolf's howls could equally well be of joy or agony. But this wolf is driven by the "dead weight" of the powerful forces which inhabit its body, and which rely on that body for existence so that the wolf MUST "feed its fur." As part of the cycles of Nature, "small" but necessary, "comprehending little" and miserably subservient to its compulsions, the wolf survives through momentous events. The picture of the night snowing stars and the sound of the earth's creaking gives a vivid impression of the workings of all-powerful natural forces, and the unwilling nature of the wolf's survival is suggested by the "dead weight" of the earth which it bears. It is "living for the earth", the earth is "under its tongue" and "trying to see through its eyes", and eventually it will come to nourish the earth through death and decomposition. These images of death, compulsion, pain and bleakness, together with onomatopoeic words like "slaving", "cracking", "whimpering" and "howling", leave the reader with an over-riding impression of misery and helplessness, and this surely must have been Hughes's own emotions at this time.

Hughes's use of the wolf as a symbol does not always have this element of self-portraiture about it, but the association which he makes between the wolf and the forces of Nature to which we ourselves are subject is constant. Alongside the predatory aspects of Hughes's wolves there is, also, their energy and the elements of freedom in their existence which can seem highly desirable in a regulated and restrictive society. In the story 'Sunday' (Wodwo, 56-70) the child, Michael, escapes from the minister's sermon and from "situations of constraint in school, in waiting rooms, with visitors," by shutting his eyes and imagining "a wolf galloping through snow-filled, moonlit forest." (Wodwo, 56) In this case, imagination succeeds in counteracting repressive forces but, in the Calder Valley as Hughes describes it in *Remains of Elmet*²², the wolf has become a ghost – a "wraith" amongst the "foundering valleys" and the "graves full of eternal silence." Driven out of the twentieth century world like the wolf in 'February' (Lupercal, 13) she "cannot any longer in all these hills / Find her pelt."

The ambivalent nature of Hughes's wolves and the mixed feelings of attraction and fear which they arouse, are matched by the role which the wolf plays as a symbol in mythology and folklore, where it has a rich and varied history. As an archetypal symbol, Hughes's wolves share this history, but specific reference to such sources in his work is unusual. In 'February' (Lupercal, 13), he does refer to two well known fairy tales, and to the ancient epic 'Song of the Nibelungs', in order to activate his reader's own fund of wolf-knowledge and to help establish the mood of the poem. In 'Lupercalia' (Lupercal, 61-3), too, he makes reference to a specific myth. But one poem in which he uses a particular mythological association more fully is 'The Green Wolf' (Wodwo, 40).

The Green Wolf was a central figure in the midsummer ceremonies that took place in Normandy in the early part of the century. During these ceremonies "a man clad all in green, who bore the title of the Green Wolf, was pursued by his comrades, and when they caught him they feigned to fling him upon the midsummer bonfire."²³ Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, associates the Green Wolf with vegetation gods which were ritually burned each year to ensure fertility in the coming season²⁴. It is this cyclical aspect of death and rebirth, this ability of Nature to "unmake and remake" the dying man, which is the subject of Hughes's poem.

The poem is almost certainly based on personal experience. In September 1961 the Hughes family moved to a small village in Devon. The following April, when their neighbour, Percy Key, suffered a stroke, Ted was called on for help by Percy's wife Rose. The events of the following few months, until Percy's death in early July, were recorded by Sylvia in journal form and, incidental to these events, is her record of the natural richness of that early spring and summer. On June 7th. she wrote:

Well, Percy Key is dying. That is the verdict. Poor old Perce, says everybody. Rose comes up almost every day. "Te-ed" she calls in her hysterical, throbbing voice. And Ted comes, from the study, the tennis court, the orchard, wherever, to lift the dying man from his armchair to his bed. He is very quiet afterwards. He is a bag of bones, says Ted. I saw him in one "turn" or "do", lying back on the bed, toothless, all beakiness of nose and chin, eyes sunken as if they were not shuddering and blinking in a fearful way. And all about the world is gold and green, dripping with laburnum and buttercups and the sweet stench of June.²⁵

'The Green Wolf' appears to be Ted's record of this time, and the same abundance of Nature fills the last four stanzas of his poem, carrying with it portents of death. The blood clot which paralyses his neighbour's body "moves in" through a "dark heaven" with the inevitability with which "the punctual evening star" heralds the night. The evening star is the Star-Son of the Moon-Goddess, who is responsible for birth, fertility and death, and the wolf itself is linked with her because of its habit of howling to the moon, and because it feeds on corpse-flesh. The white masses of hawthorn blossom with their heavy palls of "deathly perfume" are traditionally associated with the Goddess in her destructive form, and are banned from the house in many parts of England lest they bring bad luck. The bean, too, is her flower, and its "badged" jet

markings, “like the ear of a tiger”, suggest dangerous and deathly powers. The Green Wolf, in this poem is the Goddess herself, and these symbols of her deathly powers also have a fertile warmth and beauty. They “unmake and remake you”, just as the midsummer fires once devoured the Green Wolf in “one smouldering annihilation” to bring renewed fertility to the earth. So, “old brains, old bowels, old bodies,” are devoured to make way for the new in a process which “you cannot fear” because of its natural inevitability. And, despite the powerful presence of death which pervades the summer abundance of this poem, Hughes’s final images are moist, gentle ones which capture the sadness of farewell to a spirit “frozen” in a frail, crude, failing body.

In marked contrast to this poem is one published in Moortown in 1979 as part of ‘Seven Dungeon Songs’(M.123). In 1971, whilst working on Orghast with Peter Brook’s Experimental Theatre Company in Persia, Hughes was asked by Brook to help him find a fresh path into the Prometheus myth, on which the experimental work Orghast was based. Hughes turned for inspiration to Manicheanism (a Persian religion founded by Mani in 3 A.D.) in which the fundamental symbols are derived from the “identification of moral will, order, life and love with Light, evil, chaos and hatred with Darkness”²⁶. This symbolism, which has survived in the Christian teachings of the Western world, also incorporates ideas of “illumination” and emergence from darkness and imprisonment to enlightened freedom. Hughes wrote the experimental language which the actors spoke, and he constructed a mythological framework for the performance. His series of poems, ‘Seven Dungeon Songs’(M.123), draws on this Manichean symbolism to deal with the creation of mankind, with the human struggle against the darkness in and around us, and with our frustrated straining towards the healing power of light.

The first of these “Songs” is a vivid illustration of Hughes’s belief in the wolf-component in human nature. In it, the “gangrenous breath” of a spirit wolf is shown as clouding the “tabula rasa” of human nature from birth. The babe of the poem, in its innocence, is attracted by the wolf and reaches towards it in “soft-brained” ignorance of its own position of danger. And all the time the wolf’s blood drips “On to the babe’s hands”, suggesting, from the first, mankind’s murderous potential.

Behind the images of the last six lines of the poem there lurks the shadow of the mythical she-wolf which suckled Romulus and Remus, legendary founders of Rome and sons of the god, Mars, to whom the wolf was also sacred. The milky tits of Hughes’s wolf also feed and nourish a human babe but, although she can transport this babe from its earthly home and run with it “among the stars”, the journey is perilous with “precipices”. So, Hughes suggests the succour and the danger which derives from the Universal Wolf²⁷ in human nature. And the wolf’s bloody wound, linked as it is with blood on human hands, perhaps results from our own fearful efforts to destroy it, just as the last wolf in Britain was destroyed and just as our society tries to destroy any wild, animal energies in its people. The position of this poem, however, as the first of this sequence dealing with the mankind’s struggle with darkness and light, shows the influence of the wolf to be fundamental and unavoidable.

In keeping with his beliefs in the supernatural powers of poetry, Hughes makes his own

attempt to control the power of the wolf by constructing a poetic charm to contain its predatory energies with the poem 'Amulet', first published in *Moon Bells* and other poems²⁸, and reprinted as the prefatory poem in *Under the North Star*²⁹:

Inside the Wolf's fang, the mountain of heather.
Inside the mountain of heather, the Wolf's fur.
Inside the Wolf's fur, the ragged forest.
Inside the ragged forest, the Wolf's foot.
...

The form and rhythm of the poem are those of a magical incantation. By the repetition of the word "inside", the physical form of the summoned Wolf spirit with its fang, fur, tongue, blood and eye, is enclosed within its surroundings. And the circularity, which brings the Wolf's fang into the first and the last lines of the poem, ensures that the Wolf's power is contained within the poem. Whilst the wolf in this poem is a symbolic representative of wolf-nature everywhere (the word is given a capital letter each time it is used), Hughes has made its surroundings a realistic duplication of the natural wolf habitats which are, also, the natural surroundings of mankind.

In each line of the poem, the associated images have a progression and suitability which is enhanced by visual clues. The purple fang, for example, is linked with the mountain heather which, in turn, suggests the coarse wolf-fur, which is linked with the ragged forest. The Wolf's foot leads the Wolf along the stony horizon so that its tongue may taste the Doe. And by linking the Wolf's tongue and the Doe's tears, Hughes specifies and contains the Wolf's carnivorous appetites. The Doe's tears become part of the frozen swamp and of the Wolf's blood which is chilled by the snow-wind as the Wolf prowls through that wind with gleaming eyes. The final link between the Wolf's eye and the North Star is the most powerfully magical link of all, tethering the Wolf to the Earth's axis and completing the encircling magic of the charm.

Symbolic creatures like the wolf, which "tap the elemental power circuit of the Universe", may not always behave predictably, nor can they always be controlled. In the volume, *Earth-Moon*, first published in a limited edition in 1976³⁰, there are suggestions that Hughes's use of wolf-masks may not always be entirely voluntary. The poem, 'Moon-marriage', describes powerful dream animals whose arrival and "marriage" to the dreamer is "nothing you can arrange," and whose influence survives into the dreamer's waking life. "maybe a smiling wolf comes up close / While you doze off, in your chair, and gives you a kiss, / A cold wet doggy kiss," Hughes writes, describing once again an ambiguous fairy-tale wolf. But the predatory nature of this wolf, too, soon becomes apparent, for the dreamer becomes a captive: "You have been CHOSEN, and it's no good flailing awake bawling 'No!' / Wherever the wolf is, she just goes on smiling -." In a 'Moon-marriage', the "only offspring" of the involuntary possession of the dreamer by a dream animal "are poems.", and Hughes' early poem 'The Thought Fox' describes just such a marriage and birth.

The "lunatic" influence of the moon over human imagination, the "madness" and

inconsistency of shamanic/poetic flight, the involuntary nature of a shaman/poet's possession by his or her spirit guides (or familiars), and the wolf's long association with all these things in myth, folklore and fairy-tales, all come together in 'Moon-marriage' and in another Earth-Moon poem called 'Moon-theatre'. Although the shamanic trance in which the 'Moon-theatre' performance is viewed is self-induced ("tap a drum, and fix your eyes in a glassy stare."), the images which are seen, including that of the captive princess unwillingly coerced into wolfskin so that "She is a wolf, and she must howl and rave", are uncontrollable. Clearly, the spirit wolf, whether it enters the mind voluntarily or not, must be treated with caution.

Whatever the provenience of the symbolic wolf in Hughes's earlier poetry, however, his use of the wolf mask in *Wolfwatching* is not surprising given the very personal nature of many of the poems in the book and his consequent need to protect himself from the strong emotions aroused. It is also hard not to identify Hughes, himself, with the old wolf whose picture he draws for us in the title-poem.

The temptation to make such an identification becomes irresistible when one looks at the photograph of Hughes which was published with his notes on *Wolfwatching* in *The Poetry Society Bulletin* of Autumn 1989³¹. There, we can see for ourselves the benign "Woolly-bear white" creature, with "black peepers" "withered in under the white wool," just as Hughes describes the old wolf in his poem. Other phrases in the poem seem loaded with ambiguity, but they offer a less comforting picture, for this old wolf feels the constraints of his aging body, the fraying, wearying effects of a lifetime of caged energies, and the changed image which "children's gazings" have effected – converting his predatory power to "a lumpish comfort of woolly play-wolf."³² His heart is a "cooling stone", his weight "useless", and now "All his power is a tangle of old ends, / A jumble of leftover scraps and bits of energy / And bitten-off impulses and dismantled intuitions."

This pathetic creature yearns for the "anaesthetic" which "has already taken his strength, his beauty / And his life.", and one is reminded of Hughes's description in *Poetry in the Making* of the "special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerised and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind."³³ Is this the "anaesthetic" for which he waits? Is the power of poetic inspiration the power he has lost? For Hughes, water has always been the interface between this world and the Otherworld of the energies, and many of his poems, especially in *River*, demonstrate this fact. Is this the reason that "water/ Just might help and ease" the old wolf? And can we really believe that Hughes now lies curled "In a trembling wolf-pelt he no longer / Knows how to live up to."?

No. If there really is an element of identification between Hughes and the old wolf of his poem, then the poem, itself, belies the self-image that he offers there. Its lines are no "few tottering steps" born of old poetic habits. Through them Hughes's ability to evoke the wolf-energies, old and young, is demonstrably as strong as ever. And, in the disparate subjects and styles of the poems which make up this volume, there is ample evidence of Hughes continuing skill and power. Clearly, it behoves the reader to keep in mind the deceptive character of benign looking wolves, especially if they walk on two

legs like the one on the Wolfwatching volume's cover. One must remember, too, that a mask for which Hughes has an equally personal attachment³⁴ and which he links closely with imagination and survival is that of the fox, and, unlike the wolf, the artful fox still lives and flourishes in Britain.

In his notes on Wolfwatching, Hughes describes this collection of poems as "a kind of totem-pole", and certainly each poem can be seen as a carefully crafted representation of wolf-energy in one of its many forms. Many of these forms we have met before: the Macaw; the Sparrow-hawk; members of Hughes's family; the predatory deep-sea fish. Hughes calls them his "familiar", and wonders why he should consult "just these familiar at just this time." It is a question which we cannot answer, but one hopes that it is not just the old-wolf trying "to find again / That warm position he had." The volume, as a whole, does not have the sustained power and impact of sequences like Cave Birds and River, and probably one should not expect this, but there is a pervasive bleakness to the overall picture that it presents of trapped and thwarted energies, and this reflects the description of the young wolf which makes up the last two-thirds of Hughes's title-poem.

"And here / Is a young wolf, still intact." Here, in all its effortless power and beauty is the perfect creature to take up "the iron inheritance / The incredibly rich will" bequeathed to him by his ancestry. But here, too, is the cage, the hopeless "neurotic boredom", and the keeper bringing his water. He has no compulsive hunger to drive him, and no freedom to practise and perfect his hunting skills. He has lost touch with Nature and, in this city environment, he is doomed to become a cypher like the Hanged Man in the tarot-pack, but without the promise of renewal that this card usually holds.

In the final lines of the poem, Hughes sums up all that he has ever said about the dangers of caging up the wolf-energies and denying them freedom of expression. In whatever form they exist in our world they are our link with Nature: without them our inner and outer worlds will be empty and hopeless, and our eyes, like those of the young wolf in the poem, will be "Like doorframes in a desert / Between nothing and nothing."

Nevertheless, in a volume where many of the poems seem to demonstrate that such a bleak future is inevitable, Hughes characteristically ends with a poem in which the energies flow with power and freedom, creating for the top of his totem pole a dove of love, and spirit, and hope.

References and Notes

1 Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 17.

2 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* (USA: Princeton University Press, 1964), 182.

3 Hughes expressed his views at length in an interview with Ekbert Faas published as "Ted Hughes and Crow", in Vol. X of *The London Magazine* (January 1971): 5-20.

4 Ibid., 9.

5 Hughes first spoke of the healing energies of poetry in a BBC Broadcast for children on 27 September 1963, since published in *Poetry in the Making*, op.cit., 51.

6 Eliade, *Shamanism*, op.cit., 16.

7 Ibid., 168.

8 Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*, op.cit., 18.

9 Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 14.

10 Cf. Hughes's discussion of wild landscape, Ibid., 76.

11 *The Hawk in the Rain*, op. cit., 35.

12 Ted Hughes, *Lupercal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960).

13 Egbert Faas, Ted Hughes, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1980), Appendix II, 209.

14 Stuart Hirschberg identifies these wolves with Hughes and Plath in his note in *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), 220: note 111.

15 Aurelia Plath,(Ed.), *Sylvia Plath: Letters Home* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), Letter of 4 July 1956.

16 Swift's satirical tract, *A Modest Proposal*... presents a serious, detached and plausible argument which treats people (particularly children) like farm animals, to exploited, marketed and consumed.

17 Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 212.

18 This point is made by Keith Sagar in *The Art of Ted Hughes* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 22.

19 Ted Hughes, *Wodwo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 178.

20 Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, op. cit., 61.

21 This proverb is usually identified as no.27 of the "Proverbs of Hell" in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. William Blake, *The Poems and Prophecies* (London: Dent, 1970), 45.

22 Ted Hughes, *Remains of Elmet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 94.

23 James G. Fraser, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 854.

24 Ibid., 870

25 Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 241.

26 A.C. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis* (London: Eyre and Methuen, 1972) 38.

27 Hughes refers to this phrase from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (I,iii, 121) in his review of Vitus Droscher's *Mysterious Senses*, in *New Statesman* (27 November, 1964).

28 Ted Hughes, *Moon Bells and Other Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978).

29 Ted Hughes, *Under The North Star* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).

30 Ted Hughes, *Earth-Moon* (The Rainbow Press, May 1976). Published in the USA as part of *Moon-Whales and other Moon Poems* (Viking, November 1976).

31 *The Poetry Society Bulletin* (London: Poetry Book Society, Autumn 1989), 142:1-3.

32 A great deal of Hughes's work has always been for, and with, children.

33 Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*, op.cit., 17.

34 Hughes tells of his early identification with a fox, and of a dreamed fox/man which changed his Cambridge study pattern. (He discussed this most recently in a Thames TV Production, September, 1986).

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to Ann Skea's Reviews Page](#)

[Return to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalRegeneration in Remains of Elmet 1

© Ann Skea

First published in *The Challenge of Ted Hughes*, (Ed.) Sagar, St.Martin's Press, London, 1994

Throughout his creative life, Ted Hughes has used his poetry to tap the universal energies and to channel their healing powers towards the sterility and the divisions

which he sees in our world. All his major sequences of poetry work towards this end, and *Remains of Elmet* represents an important step in Hughes' ability to achieve wholeness and harmony through the imaginative, healing processes of his art.

In his pursuit of these regenerative energies, Hughes appears to have adopted the role of poet/priest/shaman, and it is a role which carries responsibilities that Hughes takes very seriously. He is aware of the creative/destructive powers of the energies he courts, and he has a superstitious belief that by fixing these powerful energies in a poem he can affect both writer and reader "in a final way" ². Consequently, Hughes has experimented with many methods of summoning and containing these energies and, whilst he is skilled at using the rhythms and the rituals of poetry for this purpose, in his longer sequences he most frequently turns to "the old method" of religious and mythological ritual in order to obtain the imaginative healing he intends.

Crow, *Gaudete* and *Cave Birds* show the progressively greater skill with which Hughes uses a framework of ritual and myth to weave together complex themes into a single dramatic and imaginative work. *Remains of Elmet* is, in every way, built on these skills. Unlike the earlier sequences, the focus of *Remains of Elmet* is on the real world, peopled by real people, not a world of imaginative fantasy through which symbolic figures journey. The world of *Elmet* existed and exists, and Hughes' poems recreate it vividly in such a way that we may perceive the human errors which have desecrated it and the enduring, everpresent forces of Nature which survive.

The sequence shows, too, a new ability to weave myth, ritual, music and drama so closely into the fabric of each poem, and into the cycle as a whole, that they are almost inseparable from it. The reader is aware of the beauty and the unity of the poetry and of its emotional impact, whilst the deeper thematic aspects of the sequence work on the subconscious mind and may never be consciously formulated. In addition to this, the beautiful integration of the poetry with Fay Godwin's dramatic and evocative photographs, and the great personal significance which this area and its people clearly have for Hughes, seem to provide all the reason we need to explain this work's creation. So successful has Hughes been in using the imagination to integrate the physical and spiritual energies in this book, that his critics have to a large extent misjudged his underlying purpose and, therefore, undervalued the importance of this sequence in the opus of Hughes' work.

Clearly, I am suggesting that there is more to *Remains of Elmet* than Hughes' record of tribal memories and his cogent and masterful demonstration of Nature's supremacy over humankind. And to demonstrate this, it is necessary to move beyond the bleak and rugged physical world that Hughes depicts and to attend to some of the metaphysical aspects of the sequence.

In examining any of Hughes' books of poetry or any of his sequences of poems, it is of value to pay particular attention to the first and last poems of that book or sequence. Characteristically, these poems delineate the imaginative boundaries within which Hughes manipulates the energies of the whole work and, because of this, they are a

useful indication of the themes and the overall purpose of the poems they encompass.

To take just two examples: *Lupercal*, which we are told contains mostly poems written as “invocations to writing”³, begins and ends with poems which symbolically and ritually evoke the creative energies; and in *Crow*, the first and last poems express Hughes’ belief in the necessity and promise of the black energies he embodies in his trickster bird whilst, at the same time, they demonstrate the care with which he summons and contains these energies.

In *Remains of Elmet*, the first and last poems of the sequence suggest two major, closely linked themes on which the other poems have been built: the theme of ‘The Mothers’, which has strong regenerative aspects; and the theme of the imprisonment of divine light, or soul, in matter and its eventual, apocalyptic release. In these poems, too, we can discern strands of the mythical/religious beliefs which form part of the complex structural fabric of this work.

The opening poem, ‘Where the Mothers’, immediately establishes a mood of pagan, elemental energy. Using rhythms and sounds which capture the wildness of nature as it is commonly experienced on the pictured moors, Hughes evokes the disembodied souls which, like the wind and the rain, howl through heaven and

Pour down onto earth

Looking for bodies

Of birds, animals, people.

In the galloping “Mothers”, there are echoes of the Nordic Valkyries. But this is the old British Kingdom of Elmet where the Celtic ‘Mothers’ – three goddesses of fertility – held sway and where ancient standing stones, like the Bridestones, still testify to the worship of Brig (Brigid), the mother goddess of the Brigantian people.

These ‘Mothers’ were the earliest Celtic-British personification of the powers of the Great Mother Goddess, Nature, whose cycles of life and death pervade this sequence.⁴ Their evocation in this opening poem defines the geographical and historical context from which the Calder Valley civilisation grew. It was these primitive energies and this bleak environment that shaped the people and gave them their toughness and endurance. It was these energies that spawned and fed the Industrial Revolution. And it was the physical and spiritual misdirection of these energies which Hughes believes brought this society to “the dead end of a wrong direction” (‘Top Withens’).

Important as these ancient goddesses are, there are other ‘Mothers’ present in the wild natural elements of this opening poem. These are the alchemical ‘Mothers’ – Air, Water and Fire – from which Hermeticists believe all things are created⁵. Hughes, who (as I have shown in *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*⁶) carefully structured his *Cave Birds* sequence on an alchemical transmutation, again uses the Hermetic/Neoplatonic myth of the imprisonment of Divine Light (or Soul) in matter, and its eventual release, to shape this work. The poems and photographs in *Remains of Elmet* demonstrate the “rummaging of light/ At the end of the world.” (‘Long Screams’) (Hughes’ use of the verb,

here, is deliberately ambiguous, as light both rummages and is rummaged). And, as he tells us clearly in one poem:

It is all
Happening to the sun
The fallen sun
Is in the hands of the water
(‘It Is All’).

In many of Fay Godwin’s photographs, and particularly in the photographs which accompany and immediately follow this poem, we can see for ourselves the “cold fire” of the trapped sun shining from clog-worn stones(‘It Is All’) and from the “busy dark atoms” (‘High Sea-Light’) of the moorland causeys, and gleaming through the darkness of the waters.

The Hermetic/Neoplatonic myth tells how, from the time of original Chaos, Divine Light (Soul) has been attracted by the Subtle Spirit, Nature, down into the dark Abyss, from whence it is released only by dissolution or death ⁷ . In the words of the Greek Neoplatonist, Porphyry, it is the “urge for pleasure” –the urge to “follow and obey their worst parts, which draws souls down into the “witches brew of generation” ⁸ , and this, perhaps, is the reason for the “silent evil joy” which accompanies the embodiment of souls in Hughes’ first poem. There, amidst the chaos of the elements, on the ancient moors of Elmet where, in a later poem, Hughes describes the “witch-brew boiling in the sky vat”(‘Moors’), the drama of generation begins.

This, too, is the starting point for the Great Work to which alchemists devote their lives. Using the alchemical ‘Mothers’, Air, Fire and Water, they undertake the careful dissolution and cleansing of the base matter of generation in order to release the Soul. Just so, in this sequence, Hughes and Godwin use the interaction of light and matter, both physically in the words and photographs, and metaphorically in the effects which these accomplish, to release the imaginative energies and bring illumination, feeling and insight. The “Grasses Of Light”, the “stones of darkness”, the “Water of light and darkness” with which both artists work in this book, are not simply “words in any phrase”(‘These Grasses of Light’), as Hughes puts it, or the interplay of light and shadow fixed in a photographic image, they are the mother elements from which our world is formed and on which our survival and the eventual metamorphosis of our souls depend. And they are the elements which, in this book, will accomplish the regeneration of the land and free the souls of its people.

The theme of the ‘Mothers’ which is established in this first poem, is reinforced by Hughes’ dedication of this book to his own mother, Edith Farrar, and by the prefatory poem in which his mother lives on briefly for him through her brother. The dreams, aspirations, achievements and failures of the Calder Valley people which make up this book are their memories, precious “Archaeology of the mouth” which Hughes tries to record before the “frayed, fraying hair-fineness” of the thread linking his spirit to theirs is finally broken.

It is through this personal aspect of the 'Mothers' that the first and last poems of the Elmet sequence are linked. And it is the influence of Hughes' mother which appears to have been germinal in the regenerative purpose which underlies Hughes' work. To explain this, let us turn now to the final poem of the Elmet sequence.

'The Angel' describes a recurrent dream which, according to Faas, Hughes has "dreamt about once a week during childhood and adolescence" 9 and at regular intervals ever since. The first poetic version of this dream appeared as 'Ballad From a Fairy Tale' in Wodwo (W.166). There, as in the Elmet version, Hughes describes a disastrous fiery event, – something like "a moon disintegrating" ('Ballad From a Fairy Tale', line 4) on "Black Halifax" ('The Angel', line 3) – and from the resulting phosphorescent crater there emerges a huge and beautiful swan/angel which lights the moors as it passes low across them "towards the West" ('Ballad... ', line 31). At first, Hughes thinks this angel brings a blessing, but his mother's words, when she interprets this "immense omen" ('The Angel', line 24) for him, turn the "beauty suddenly to terror" ('The Angel' line 17).

In neither poem are we told Hughes' mother's words, but the detail which links Hughes' vision with events in his life, and which gives her words "doubled" ('Ballad... ', line 59) significance, is his second sighting of the angel's strange and puzzling halo. This "enigmatic", fringed "square of satin" ('The Angel', line 21) which ripples in the wind of the angel's flight, when seen again is a piece of funerary furniture 10 . So, this angel of beauty and light is also an omen of disaster and death, and the fact that both Sylvia Plath and Edith Farrar are buried on the moors where Hughes stood in his dream, seems to suggest that the angelic omen has been fulfilled. Yet, despite the very personal nature of this poem, with its reference to Hughes' family and to events in his own life which left him in "darkness" (just as the angel left him in his dream), Hughes' retelling of his dream at the end of Remains of Elmet links it closely with the fall of the whole Calder Valley society and gives it much greater prophetic significance.

Several things about the poem itself suggest the broader symbolic function which Hughes intends for the angel in the Elmet sequence. Firstly, there is the ambiguity of the poem's closing lines and the echoes which they contain of the last poem in Hughes' earlier sequence, Adam and the Sacred Nine 11 . And secondly, there are the resemblances which exist between Hughes' angel and the Apocalyptic messengers described in the Kabbalah, the Koran, and, in particular, in the biblical books of Ezekial and Revelation 12 , all of which portend both destruction and spiritual salvation.

At first reading, what Hughes says in the final stanza of 'The Angel' seems quite clear:

When next I stood where I stood in my dream
Those words of my mother,
Joined with earth and engraved in rock,
Were under my feet.

Metaphorically, "those words" of his mother which turned a blessing to terror are, indeed, now joined with the earth beneath his feet. But, although there are significant

words engraved in rock at the place where Hughes mother is buried, on her headstone there are only names and dates. On Sylvia's headstone nearby, however, there are words which assert, through the symbolism of the lotus, the endurance of the creative energies and the promise of regeneration and spiritual rebirth 13 :

EVEN AMIDST FIERCE FLAMES
THE GOLDEN LOTUS CAN BE PLANTED

Whether or not these are the words to which Hughes refers in 'The Angel', their essence is central to many of the Elmet poems. And, given the multiple meanings that the word 'mother' has in the opening poems and the parallels which exist between this sequence and Adam and the Sacred Nine , we can interpret the closing stanza of Remains of Elmet as presenting a similar message of enlightenment and hope.

Adam and the Sacred Nine , like the Elmet sequence, deals with the embodiment of elemental energy in human form, the proud dreams and aspirations of humankind, and the lessons and enlightenment which are possible through Nature. In the opening poem of both sequences, pure energy, in the form of a song, searches the "cradle-grave" of earth for suitable embodiment. In both sequences (although more obviously in Adam and the Sacred Nine), the birds have a symbolic function, acting as the natural agents of enlightenment and regeneration as they move between heaven and earth, between the physical and the non-physical. And in both sequences, the closing poems show two human representatives, Adam and Hughes, linked with their mothers through the soles of their feet – a traditional symbolic route of enlightenment.

The enlightenment which Hughes grants to our progenitor, Adam, is exactly that which the poems in Remains of Elmet seek to bring to us – the knowledge that mankind is not only made of the elements of earth, we are also made for earth. Like Adam we cannot "tread emptiness" – we depend on the earth for our survival, it feeds us and gladdens us. It is through the earth that the energies of the Source flow to us, and only by co-operating with Nature rather than seeking to dominate her, can we achieve our true potential.

Remains of Elmet , as a history of the Calder Valley people, demonstrates the fate of a society which fails to learn this lesson. And Hughes' angel, in this context, is a symbol through which he invokes the elemental forces of the universe to redress the natural balance which has been disturbed. The huge, illuminating beauty of the angel, the awe and terror which she inspires, her association with the moon and snow, and her eventual disappearance "under the moor", all suggest that she is the Mother Goddess, Nature, and, as such, she has the power both to destroy and to create.

As mentioned earlier, there are resemblances between Hughes' angel and the Apocalyptic messengers of several major religious texts. They, too, appear amidst fiery disturbances to bring a warning to the human race. They, too, serve an omnipotent power which threatens death and destruction for human misdeeds. And they, too, offer the hope of blessing and spiritual rebirth. Through such links as these, Hughes channels the invoked energies of his angelic symbol towards creative rather than

destructive ends. At the same time, he indicates the spiritual aspect of the regeneration he seeks to effect in *Remains of Elmet* .

Hughes makes a similar, biblical, allusion in 'The Trance of Light' where he envisages the renewal of the Earth as it "stretches awake, out of Revelations". And he suggests the spiritual aspect of his work in such images as that of the "soul's caddis" which, in 'These Grasses of Light', clings to the threadbare elements of creation awaiting its own release. The biblical references in *Remains of Elmet* , however are few, and Hughes' angel represents a much older, pre-biblical Goddess. So, he turns most often (and more appropriately) to the pre-biblical Hermetic/Neoplatonic myths that I have already discussed and, taking these abstract stories of the original creation and the eternal struggle between darkness and light, he anchors them firmly in the reality of the prevailing weather conditions on the West Yorkshire moors. In this way, he uses our own experience of the ever-present powers of Nature to alert us to the continuing presence of his Goddess in our world. At the same time, he obliges us to give credence to the picture of the natural cleansing and renewal of the Earth which he presents in *Remains of Elmet* .

But what of spiritual regeneration? How does Hughes handle this?

From the very beginning, the spiritual element in *Remains of Elmet* has been linked imaginatively with music. It was there in the faint lark-song which accompanied the embodiment of souls in living creatures; in the "mad singing in the hills"('The Trance of Light') which became submerged by the slavery of War, Industry and Religion; and in the fragile memories which reverberate in the yarning of the old people:

Attuned to each other, like the strings of a harp
They are making mesmerising music,
Each one bowed at his dried bony profile, as at a harp.
Singers of a lost kingdom.

Wild melody, wilful improvisations.
(*'Crown Point Pensioners'*)

As the spirit of the people succumbs to the self-imposed rigidity of their lives and they become "four-cornered, stony"(*'Hill-Stone Was Content'*) in their work and "cowed"(*'Mount Zion'*), instead of inspired, by their chosen religion, the music is heard, still, in the song of a cricket(*'Mount Zion'*), the "wobbling water-call"(*'Curlews in April'*) of curlew, and in the magical drumming of snipe(*'spring-Dusk'*). Above all, it is there in the poetic music which Hughes makes as he draws for us this realistic, and paradigmatic, picture of human strengths and human weaknesses.

Still, as the elements work to free the Earth from "the human shape"(*'Top Withens'*) which has been imposed on it, the music of the Earth, itself, can be heard in the poems. Away from the darkness of the valleys, where wild rock has been "conscripted"(*'Hill-Stone Was Content'*) by Mankind and has forgotten its "wild roots" and its "earth Song", the "big animal of rock"(*'The Big Animal of Rock'*) crouches singing

in its “homeland” on the moors. This is the “cantor”, the preceptor who leads the spiritual singing at Nature’s “Festival of Unending” death and rebirth and, like a soft continuous undertone, its music accompanies the elemental choir in perpetual worship. Under the heather and bog-cotton, the harebells and willowherb, the dark rock-animal – part of the first created matter – endures until Hughes’ poetic cleansing rituals are almost complete. Then, ‘In April’, it emerges with the reawakening Earth to stretch itself, cat-like, under the strengthening sun and to lead the Messianic singing in ‘The Word That Space Breathes’.

This poem follows a series of bleak, wintery poems and photographs in which the light and the life of Earth sink towards their nadir. In it, Hughes draws on the great choral tradition of the North of England, where Handel’s Messiah is a well known and much loved part of the Easter celebrations, to create an oratorio of his own in which, in the “chapel of clouds”, the music of the people, the land and the skies gloriously heralds the Natural resurrection which is to come.

Again adapting biblical stories to suit his own purposes, Hughes gives the Valley of Dry Bones, which Ezekial saw in his vision 14, a contemporary presence in the Calder Valley. The biblical “Word of the Lord”, which promised salvation to the people of Israel, becomes one with the winds which breathe new life into the scattered bones of the people. And, as in the Book of Revelation, the Word of this disembodied voice is accompanied by a “huge Music”: “as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings saying Alleluia:...” “ (Revelation, 19:6-7).

In Hughes’ poem, as in Fay Godwin’s photograph opposite it, the walls which the people so painstakingly built, the enclosures into which their lives and cares went “like manure”(‘Walls’), guide the spiritual wind-song upwards, leading it “from every step of the slopes” to the crest where clouds and walls meet. As if in a musical crescendo, the “huge music/ Of sightlines” is gathered into a dramatic focus which joins Heaven and Earth, and this climax is echoed in the finals stanza of the poem, like an Alleluia! for “The Messiah/ Of opened rock”.

So it seems that the illuminating spiritual song, like that of the great bird which once before, long ago, “drew men out of rock” and “put a light in the valley”(‘Heptonstall Old Church’), will return to the Earth. And, after the long and careful cleansing ritual which Hughes has undertaken in the Elmet sequence thus far, he is finally ready to create the Apocalyptic “golden holocaust” which is presaged in ‘Football At Slack’ and by means of which the trapped light will be freed from the valley, the souls released, and “a new heaven and a new earth” 15 created.

In ‘Cock-Crows’, Hughes again combines present reality with myth. The scene which he describes from his hilltop vantage point is one which is quite familiar to him and, were it not for the thematic concerns of Remains of Elmet (which I have already discussed) and the careful positioning of this poem in the sequence, one might be content to accept it as a highly imaginative picture of the sort of sunrise which occurs almost daily in the

Calder Valley. Careful attention to the diverse connotations and allusions that the imagery in this poem contains, however, soon makes it clear that there is a deeper level of meaning, and that this poem is of central importance to Hughes' regenerative work.

The title of the poem joins "Cock" with "Crows", linking the symbolic bird of dawn with those of darkness and of death to create a unity from which there can be a new beginning. In the connection between darkness and light, birth and death, which is thus achieved, there exists a consubstantiality of opposites which allows for change and renewal. At the same time, the crowing cock which the hyphenated words in the title invite us to see and hear is, traditionally, the herald of the risen Sun-god and the harbinger of resurrection. Here, in the title of Hughes' poem, the imperative bird-call signals a "tidal dawn" which splits "heaven from earth" and brings the first "taste" of gold light to the encompassing darkness, as if portending a new world as well as a new day.

Hughes' imagery of mountain-tops, sunrise, gold and splendour, again has precedents in the visions of the new Jerusalem which both Ezekial and John of the Book of Revelation were granted 17 . But the strongest and most telling echoes in this poem are those of Blake's prophetic writings. Hughes' opening lines, "I stood on a dark summit, among dark summits -/Tidal dawn splitting heaven from earth", in tone and content, recall the beginning of Blake's poem in his address 'To the Christians' on Plate 77 of Jerusalem 16 :

I stood among my valleys of the south
And saw a flame of fire, even as a wheel
Of fire surrounding all the heavens:...

Blake's lines precede the final chapter of Jerusalem which describes the awakening of Albion. And (making another suggestive link between Hughes' poem and Blake's prophetic book) Blake's etching at the top of Plate 78 shows the cockerel-headed figure of Hand (the composite Spectre of the Sons of Albion) watching a brown-rayed sun which David Erdman identifies as "the setting material sun – a signal for the rise of a more bright sun" 18 .

Although Hughes' imagery in the rest of his poem is quite different to Blake's the parallels are clearly present. His "bubbling valley cauldron" suggests Blake's "Furnaces of Los". And the cockcrows, the "sickle shouts" which he kindles from it, "soaring harder, brighter, higher," and "bursting to light/Brightening the undercloud", are like the "arrows of flaming gold"(Jerusalem , 95:13) which flew into the heavens from Albion's "horned Bow Fourfold" until the "dim Chaos brighten'd beneath, above, around:"(Jerusalem , 98:14). Above all, it is the rhythm and diction at the central climax of Hughes' poem which echoes those of Blake in exultant and glorious power, and which invite us to believe that "... the Night of Death is past and the Eternal Day / Appears upon our Hills".(Jerusalem , 97:3-4).

Whilst these comparisons between 'Cock-Crows' and Blake's Jerusalem are worth making for the light which they throw on Hughes' purpose in this poem, and in Remains of Elmet as a whole, they should not be allowed to overshadow the complex interweaving of themes which Hughes has achieved here in his own unique way. For

the light that Hughes creates in the dark valleys of Elmet is an effusion of the “magical soft mixture” that bubbles in the Earth Goddesses’ cauldron; and the whole process, with its bubbling mixture, its molten and metallic glistenings, its pervasive mists, and its bursts of light and sound, is one in which the alchemical ‘Mothers’ – Fire, Water and Air – are intimately involved. The crowing of Hughes’ cockerels in this West Yorkshire valley is the realisation of the voice of the Phoenix which, in Adam and the Sacred Nine “... flies flaming and dripping flame / Slowly across the dusty sky” until

Flesh trembles
The alter of its death and rebirth

Where it descends
Where it offers itself up

And the naked the newborn
Laughs in the blaze.

By the end of ‘Cock-Crows’, the fiery purification of the Earth has been completed and we are left with a cooling crucible, lifeless and dark, in which the only remaining signs of towns are smoking holes in the earth. Hughes’ golden holocaust is over. And now, as the sun climbs into the “wet sack” of Earth’s atmosphere, Heaven and Earth are reunited and the “day’s-work” of re-creation can begin.

With his visionary renewal of the Earth completed, it still remains for Hughes to free the souls which have been trapped in the world of generation. This he does in ‘Heptonstall Cemetery’. In rhythms which convey a mood of powerful, exultant energy, this poem shows the whole Earth in motion. The wind “slams across the tops”, the rain “cuts upwards”, and amidst this chaos of air and water the moors become one “giant beating wing” in which the risen souls are “living feathers”. Finally, in a glow of “storm-silver”, like the great radiant haze of sunlight in Fay Godwin’s accompanying photograph, the reborn souls of the human race, like a family of dark swans, lift from every horizon and fly Westward towards the Atlantic – the direction in which Hughes’ angel disappeared.

So, taking all that remains of the old Celtic-British kingdom of Elmet, in the physical reality of the West Yorkshire moors with their changing skies and their fickle weather, Hughes has poetically transformed the death of the Calder Valley society into a spiritual rebirth. At the same time, he and Fay Godwin have brought some transforming imaginative energies into our lives which may allow us to attain our own enlightenment and spiritual release. Such enlightenment is not easily achieved. And, as Hughes constantly shows us in his work, it will only come when we learn to open our senses to the world around us and to attend to the lessons of our own great mother – Nature.

ENDNOTES

Remains of Elmet was first published by Faber and Faber in 1979. A second edition, with some poem titles changed and with additional poems and photographs, was published in 1994. All references in this text are to the 1979 edition.

Hughes, T. Critical Forum Series , Norwich Tapes Ltd, 1978.

Faas, E. Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe , Santa Barbara, Black Sparrow, 1980, Appendix II, p.209.

Early Celtic deities are discussed by Nora Chadwick in The Celts , London, Penguin, 1970, p.154.

“... the three Mothers... are Aire, Water and Fire:... The Heavens were made of Fire, the Earth was made of Water... and the Ayre proceeded from the middle Spirit”, lines 1457-1467 of Thomas Vaughan’s, *Magica Adamica* , (pub.1655), in Rudrum, E.(Ed.). *The Works of Thomas Vaughan* , Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984.

Skea, A. Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest . Armidale NSW: University of New England Press, 1994.

Everard, Dr.(trans.1650.) *The Divine Pymander of Hermes* , San Diego, Wizard Books, 1978, Book 3, pp.18-19. Also, Rudrum, E. *The Works of Thomas Vaughan* , op.cit. pp.54-58.

Porphyry. *On the Cave of the Nymphs* , (written 3AD), in Lamberton, R.(Trans.). New York, Station Hill Press, 1983, pp.9-10.

Faas, E. Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe , op.cit. p.139.

Hughes confirmed this in a letter to me in November 1984.

Hughes confirmed this in a letter to me in November 1984.

First published as a limited edition by Rainbow Press in Spring 1979, then in Moortown , London, Faber, 1979. pp.157-170.

The Koran, traditional chapter 54:1; the Book of Revelation, 7:21, and Ezekial, 1:4-28.

These lines can be found in a poem by Wu Ch’eng which is clearly about alchemy and regeneration, (*The Adventures of Monkey* translated by Arthur Waley):

The Patriarch Subodhi then recited:

To spare and tend the vital powers, this and nothing else

Is sum and total of all magic, secret and profane.

All is comprised in these three, Spirit, Breath and Soul;

Guard them closely, screen them well; let there be no leak.

Store them within the frame.

That is all that can be learnt, and all that can be taught.

I would have you mark the tortoise and the snake locked in tight embrace.

Locked in tight embrace, the vital powers are strong;

Even in the midst of fierce flames the Golden Lotus may be planted,

The Five Elements compounded and transposed, and put to new use.

When that is done, be which you please, Buddha or Immortal.

Ezekial 37.

Revelation, 21:1

Ezekial 40 and 43: Revelation, 21.

Reference numbers used here refer to the original etched plates as indicated by David Erdman(Ed.) in *The Illuminated Blake* , New York, Anchor Press, 1974.

Erdman, D. *The Illuminated Blake*, op.cit. p.357.

© Ann Skea, 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Variant Editions: Cave Birds, River, Remains of Elmet, Elmet and Three Books¹.

First published in the Ted Hughes Society Journal, Volume 2, Issue 1

© Ann Skea.

The trade edition of Cave Birds was published on the 2nd of September, 1978; that of Remains of Elmet in April 1979; and of River in September 1983. In 1988 I completed my doctoral thesis on the alchemical structure of these three sequences and some time in 1992 Christopher Reid, who was at that time Hughes' poetry editor at Faber & Faber, read the manuscript of my book, Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest, which was based on that analysis, and spoke to Ted about it. On the 18th of August that year Hughes wrote to me that "reading your book galvanized Christopher Reid into publishing Elmet, Cave Birds and River as a single volume"². He also said that for this new book he had deleted some poems and revised others². Three Books was published in 1993.

In that same letter, Hughes went on to say that Faber would now do an expanded edition of Remains of Elmet with more photographs and more verses "mainly from other books – poems about that region, simply". Elmet was published in 1994.

In conversation with me shortly after Elmet appeared, Hughes, in his usual generous way, expressed concern that his alteration of the sequencing and the content of both Remains of Elmet and River might negate some of the ways I had interpreted the sequences in my book. He was also anxious to know what I thought of the new Elmet, which was very similar to the sequencing and poems he had chosen for Three Books, and whether the changes bothered me. I replied that I thought Elmet was quite different to Remains of Elmet: that he seemed to have had a quite different purpose for it, and that in it he seemed to be laying something to rest, completing something. I remember commenting that the final photograph in the new book, with its large, carefully placed graveyard cross, was like a benediction: R.I.P. Hughes' response to this was a heart-felt sighed "Yes!"³.

That Hughes' purpose and his choice of poems and sequencing changed between the original trade editions and the later publication of Three Books and Elmet was not surprising. Cave Birds, which step-by-step followed the stages of an alchemical process and which was put together, as Hughes told Roberts and Gifford, "as deliberately as a clock"⁴, remained unchanged in Three Books, but whilst there was an underlying, transformative, alchemical theme in Remains of Elmet and River, the alchemy was in the poems and the photographs themselves and in the cyclical patterns of nature. Ted still chose the first and last poems of the new sequences with his customary care, and often, especially in River, he paired the poems so that a 'downbeat' poem (to use his own terminology) was immediately followed by an 'upbeat poem'. The ethereal beauty of 'Ophelia'⁵, for example, counters the physical horrors described in '1984 On 'The Tarka Trail' '⁶.

This careful concern for the balance of energies in his sequences is apparent, too, in the letter Hughes wrote to Christopher Reid when he first began rearranging the poems

for Three Books. 'Be a Dry-Fly Purist', which beautifully conflates a particularly controlled method of fishing with the careful process of capturing poems, was to have been followed by 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning', which, Hughes wrote, describes the "poacher's approach". So, the deliberate, socially required, learned precision, which is the theme of the first, was to have been balanced by the earthy, natural, instinctive energies of the second. "An all rounder", in fishing and poetry, Hughes commented, "has to be master of all the methods that produce the goods and the thrill"⁷. In the end, the poem which followed 'Be a Dry-Fly Purist'⁸ in Three Books was 'A Rival'⁹, which describes not a human poacher but a creature of Nature responding to the demands of Nature – a cormorant, a raider, a programmed "massacre-machine". No human poacher could match its in-born skill, and that Hughes should have considered it 'a rival' also suggests much about the way he viewed his own raids on the river of his subconscious when he was writing poems.

The River sequence in Three Books begins, in 'Salmon Eggs' ¹⁰, with a natural prelude to birth and renewal, rather than with the artificial human intervention in this process which is described in 'The Morning Before Christmas' ¹¹. The poems no longer follow the cycle of the year, nine poems have been dropped and thirteen added, seven of which were previously unpublished. There is less light and magic and more darkness in the River sequence in Three Books but still it ends with the uplifting blessing and enlightenment of 'That Morning' ¹², which, as the final poem in the book would have been chosen by Hughes with special care.

The changes between the original sequence of poems in the trade edition of Remains of Elmet and the sequences in Three Books and Elmet are more radical. Eighteen of the Remains of Elmet poems were dropped and the sequence was substantially re-ordered for Three Books. This re-ordering remained largely intact for Elmet but eighteen poems (fourteen from earlier books and four previously unpublished) were inserted, together with a number of new photographs. Only four photographs were dropped.

The reason for these changes, and for the very different moods and purposes of Remains of Elmet and Elmet, are apparent in letters which Ted wrote to a number of his friends. Before beginning to work on Remains of Elmet, Hughes wrote to Fay Godwin about the changes in the landscape of the Elmet area and of the way the "primal reality of the region" was "taking over again" as the people of his mother's generation and everything about their history and their way of life died out. "If only some of that could be captured in photographs", he wrote. And he also wanted to capture something of the feeling of freedom he had felt when hunting on the moors with his older brother, Gerald, "something", as he said, of that "great feeling that you were utterly free and alone"¹³.

Hughes was aware, however, that his own feelings about the area were problematic. "I know I do have an immense amount locked up in all that", he told Godwin. "At times it is overwhelming when I try to release it". And writing to Glyn Hughes shortly after the publication of Remains of Elmet, he was even more blunt about these feelings, describing them as "not quite hatred but something pretty sour"¹⁴. Later, writing to Ben

Sonnenberg, he described how, digging down through his own “strata” as he wrote the poems, he had found “dislike, dread, even hatred”, and so he had “skidded off” and “borrowed” his mother’s feelings, which were, “more suitable” for what he wanted from the book. His mother, he said, “had the right tribal allegiances to the Holy Ground and the magical dead”¹⁵.

Hughes was well aware, therefore, that *Remains of Elmet* grew mostly from “what my mother felt about it [Elmet] when I was about 5”¹⁶, and he knew that he had shelved his own mixed feelings about this place in which he had lived the early, most formative years of his childhood. He told Glyn Hughes that he had been thinking he ought to write “something supplementary” in order to remedy this. And in his letter to Ben Sonnenberg in 1981, he said that he would like “to try seriously, before time overtakes” to deal with his own feelings about Elmet¹⁷. Elmet, with the re-ordered poems and photographs, and with the inclusion of many more personal poems about himself and his family, was his attempt to do this.

Yet, the process of rewriting and re-ordering the poems was not easy. In June 1985, Ted wrote to Keith Sagar, “The rewriting had been head-in-sack drudgery. It is the sort of book I should have written in my twenties, when my feelings about the place were still innocent and unspoiled and fairly simple”¹⁸. And in a letter to Leonard Baskin on August 15th, 1984, he described rewriting Elmet as “a brick wall style project. The brick wall being the door to the family tomb, I suppose.”¹⁹. “Everything that dies”, he went on, “is a goblin that carries away pieces of your brain”. And for the artist, the only cure for this “lobotomy by bereavement” is “resurrection, release of the goblins, reclamation of the goblins”.

No wonder Ted’s relief when Elmet was finally published was clear in his response to my comments on the final photograph. Yet, although he once described Elmet as his “definitive Calder Valley collection”²⁰, he was not happy with it. Looking back on the re-writing shortly before he died, he told Keith Sagar: “Of Elmet’s three orderings [Remains of Elmet, Three Books and Elmet]: only the first works! That was Fay’s – with maybe a nudge or two here and there from me”. He was aware that his own aims and Fay’s style of photographs changed between the publication of *Remains of Elmet* and Elmet, and “because of the coming and going” he “never got the text, let alone the order of it” that he wanted. “I feel”, he wrote, “that I let Fay down, somewhat, except for that first time round”²¹.

NOTES

1. Ted Hughes: *Collected Poems*, Faber, 2003, has not been included in this discussion, because Hughes did not choose the order of the poems for that collection and there are, in any case, some errors. ‘Two Photographs at Top Withens’, for example, is included amongst ‘Uncollected’ poems on page 840, although a note on page 1299 indicates that the text is from Elmet and the poem was first published in *Three Books*.
2. Unpublished letter, Hughes to Ann Skea. British Library manuscript. Add 74257.
3. Skea, *Diary/Notebook 1994*. British Library, Dep. 10515.

4. Hughes to Roberts and Gifford, 19 October 1978. Reid,C.(Ed.) Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. p.395.
5. Hughes, Three Books, Faber, 1993. p.122.
6. Three Books. pp.118-121.
7. Hughes to Reid, 21 June 1992. Letters, pp.612-3.
8. Three Books. p.123.
9. Three Books. p.124.
10. Three Books. p.105.
11. Hughes, 'River', Faber, 1983. p.9. This was the opening poem of the 1983 Faber edition of River. The order of poems in the American edition published by Harper and Row, NY,1984. was different again and I have not examined this edition.
12. Three Books. pp. 178-9.
13. Hughes to Godwin, 4 July 1976. Letters. pp. 378-380.
14. Hughes to Glyn Hughes, [November 1979]. Letters.p.430.
15. Hughes to Sonnenberg, 30 May 1981. Letters. pp.447-8.
16. Ibid. p. 430.
17. Letters. p. 448.
18. Unpublished letter, Hughes to Sagar. British Library Add.78757.
19. Unpublished letter. Hughes to Baskin, British Library. Add.83684.
20. Gifford: Interview with Fay Godwin, Thumbscrew, 18 Spring 2001.
21. Unpublished letter, Hughes to Sagar, British Library. Add. 78756. 14 Oct. 1998.

The Ted Hughes Society

The Ted Hughes Society

Promoting the scholarly reading and discussion of the work of Ted Hughes

© Ann Skea 2021. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go to Poetic Quest Homepage

Go to Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional

A Creative Collaboration: R. J. Lloyd and Ted Hughes

(My thanks to R. J. Lloyd, Louise Lloyd, Carol Hughes and Frances McDowall).

© Ann Skea.

In the years between 1959 and his death in 1998, Ted explored and experimented with many different ways of publishing his poetry and his desire to find an inexpensive, reliable way of making poetry easily available to everyone never diminished. In the course of his experimentation, he collaborated with a number of artists and publishers to produce broadsides, posters, books, and pamphlets in limited editions. Some of these collaborations, like that with his long-time friend, Leonard Baskin, are well-known and well documented. Others, like his equally successful work with R. J. Lloyd between 1970 and 1994 are not.

Reg Lloyd is primarily a painter but he works in many media, including stained-glass, pottery and printmaking. He and Ted first met through a mutual friend and they first found common ground in childhood memories of a shop bell ringing: Reg's parents had owned a drapers shop and Ted's parents had been newsagents. From this slight beginning they discovered that they shared other interests and their friendship developed. Then, some time in the mid-sixties, a suggestion was made that they should work together to produce posters and broadsides. Reg had already started work on some silk-screen prints and they both liked the idea, so, their collaboration began.

Ted gave Reg four poems: 'King of Carrion', 'That Moment', 'Crow's Last Stand' and 'Crow and the Birds', and Reg recalls that he "printed the text on an old Hercules poster press using wooden typeface, then added the silkscreen decorations. These were produced in a very limited edition of twenty copies of each, which were subsequently included in my exhibition of silkscreen prints and monotypes at the Irving Galley, Bideford, in August 1970¹". Poems by Ted Hughes and John Moat were included in this exhibition and the exhibition catalogue noted that the poets provided "themes for some of the suites" of prints, "adding a deeper dimension of meaning". It went on to say that Reg's prints were "not illustrations of the poetry but, rather, extensions of the mood evoked by the words – a partnership of word and image"².

"Time went on with mutual visits", writes Reg. "Ted would bring his latest works and I became bold enough to suggest that Baskin's work was too much akin to Ted's, to which he agreed and, indeed, wrote in the copy of *Cave Birds* which he gave me 'A cockfight in poetry'". But it was Carol Hughes who first suggested that Reg should look at the manuscript of *What is the Truth?* with a view to illustrating it. "I looked", says Reg, "and decided to have a go. Sent some specimens to Fabers and they commissioned me to carry on. I'm not sure what the contract arrangements were at the time but there didn't seem to be any limitations as to how many illustrations there were to be. So Fabers sent me the galleys.... All that was decided was the format, so I chopped up the galleys and reassembled them to fit around my illustrations".

WITcover

Reg designed and illustrated the whole book and on the cover, knowing of Ted's superstitions and that Ted would remember the old rhyme 'One for Sorrow, Two for Joy...', he added a tiny extra magpie to his drawing. Ted also asked him to include a wren somewhere in the book. Although the Jenny Wren is only briefly mentioned in the text, the wren is an important bird in English mythology, a sacred oracle bird, King of the birds and representative of the fertile energies of nature. Ted described it vividly in *Adam and the Sacred Nine*³, where it is one of the 'angelic powers' which visit Adam to awaken him to spiritual life⁴. So Reg provided two wrens. One appears opposite the page associated with the Christmas Goose and the two muddy-footed goose "queens", the other at the end of the book amongst all the 'holy' animals⁵.

What is the Truth?, which was published by Faber in 1984, was marketed as a children's book and won the Guardian's Children's Fiction award for that year. It was dedicated to Clare and Michael Morpurgo, friends and Devon farming neighbours of

Ted's who had first suggested the project to him⁶. Written in poetry and prose, it is a fable in which the spirits of a sleeping "Farmer, his Wife, and Son and Daughter, the Vicar, the Poacher, the Schoolmaster and the Shepherd" each describe the different animals around them. Each description is a version of the truth about that animal, and each version reflects the speaker's own experience of the world. So, for example, the Farmer's wife describes the cow as a motherly creature, the Farmer sees cows as hard work, and their daughter sees only their gentle beauty. Each, as Ted wrote in 1989, "has his/her own idea of what any particular creature is, but none of them know that each one is actually God"⁷.

WITanimals

Writing to Baskin in November 1983, Ted called this book "my poems about animals for the infantile"⁸. He went on to say, only half ironically: "Every bard speaks for a tribe – mine is the Universal infantile, a mighty people". There are echoes here of the words of Ted's protagonist in *Cave Birds*, who claims to be "Imbecile Innocent"⁹; and of the people in *Remains of Elmet* whose "everlasting play"¹⁰ brought ruin to them and their enterprises. The importance of this fable to Ted and his special meaning of both 'infantile' and 'imbecile innocent' is clear in the explanation of *What Is The Truth?* which he provided for teachers in the Poetry Book Society's leaflet, *Classroom Choice*¹¹. His people, as he pointed out, are literally asleep but they are also spiritually unawakened: their versions of the Truth, therefore, are only partial. The real truth, revealed in the words of God at the end of the book, is the Blakean truth that everything that lives is holy: "I am each of these things....And each of these things is me". And Reg Lloyd's black and white illustrations convey the true beauty of even the most humble and the most maligned of creatures, such as the worm, the mosquito, the flea and the fly.

Ted's original idea for the book had been a more complicated story of the way in which God's Son learns about man's oppression of "the creatures he loves best". He described it in a letter to Nick Gammage in 1998 but went on to say that because the book was intended for *Farms for City Children*, in writing the poems he "relaxed this scheme....simply let the creatures blossom and obscured the first theme with another". So, the fable which he "floated" as "a carrier wave for transmission about creatures on a farm" became one about "the true divinity of creatures and man's inability to see that truth" ¹².

In his letter to Baskin, Ted wrote that the book was "really charming, richly illustrated" and that Reg had done a "lovely job...Far and away his best work, I think". Years later, in an introduction which Ted wrote for a retrospective exhibition of Reg's work at the Hereford City Museum and Art Gallery in 1996, the importance of Reg's illustrations as part of Ted's vision is clearer: "These were black and white drawings, but it struck me at the time, there is hardly a plate in the book without its heavenly light – a moon or sun. Even the worms, in one of the best, seem to be worshipping the rising sun. One way or another, he has made each of these creatures a sacred figure"¹³.

Sadly, in the later Faber publications *Collected Animal Poems* (1995); *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems* (2003); and *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems for Children* (2005), the

poems appear without the connecting story and without Reg Lloyd's illustrations¹⁴.

After *What Is The Truth?*, Reg suggested to Ted that they do another "small richly-coloured book about familiar creatures" and publish it themselves. Ted spoke to me of this as their "naughty adventure" outside the Faber fold¹⁵; and Reg writes that they "decided to go it alone (much to Fabers' annoyance) under their own imprint 'The Sunstone Press'. Ted simply wrote out a possible list of subjects and I went away and did my paintings and Ted did his poems. The results were quite uncanny sometimes, as though some mysterious cross fertilisation had taken place". C&C Cover

The result of this venture was *The Cat and the Cuckoo*, which they published in 1987 as a limited edition of 2,000 books, 250 of which were numbered and signed by both artist and poet. In addition, a series of 28 separate sheets was published, each reproducing one of Reg's paintings and the accompanying poem by Ted. Reg designed and illustrated the book. He also designed the Sunstone Press imprint, and the advertising flyer which contained small images of all 28 of the paintings and, like the cover of the book, featured Reg's picture of the Lloyd family cat, Tim. The first printing of Ted's poem 'Cat' appeared on the back of the flyer.

C&C title page

Reg's prints were exhibited at Senate House in London, Exeter University and the Barnstaple Library, Sterts Arts centre in Cornwall and a number of National Trust houses, and order forms and prints were made available at each. Originally Ted and Reg had planned to produce four books in *The Cat and the Cuckoo* format so that they could be boxed together but production and distribution proved to be more difficult and more expensive than anticipated. Eventually, they took up the offer of a new printing of 2,000 copies of *The Cat and the Cuckoo* for "a bargain price", but were unable to sell them. "We had to go cap-in-hand to Fabers and get them to take it on", Ted told me: and Fabers "spoiled the plan"¹⁶. In a letter to Keith Sagar in October 1993, Ted wrote: "Faber had about 2,000 Cats and Cuckoos for two years and never sold one. Eventually Reg and I took them back. He's selling his in fifties to art galleries, National Trust shops etc."¹⁷. Reg cannot recall selling the book in fifties to galleries, but he did give them away to schools or children's charities and, at the time of writing his memoir (2009), he still had some for sale.

In his letter to Nick Gammage in 1998, Ted wrote that after writing about the animals in *What is the Truth?*, "eventually I tried again, with 'The Cat and the Cuckoo'....Mainly, I wanted to write pieces that would make it easier (even easier?) for readers - urban readers - to like these creatures. Or to share my liking. Or to make something pleasurable out of describing my liking"¹⁸. An important part of the dedication in *The Cat and the Cuckoo* is to "all the children who visit FARMS FOR CITY CHILDREN"¹⁹.

The next book on which Ted and Reg collaborated was *The Mermaid's Purse*. Again, this book was to be their own Sunstone Press publication; and again Ted wrote a list of possible subjects²⁰, then Reg did his paintings and Ted wrote the poems. Reg chose the title and painted an image of a Mermaid's Purse for the label on the slip-cover of the

book. Mermaid's Purse Slip CaseA Mermaid's Purse (sometimes also known as a Devil's Purse) is the collagenous egg-case which surrounds the fertilized eggs of some sharks, dolphins, skate, and an ancient order of fish known as 'Chimera'. The empty cases are frequently washed up on beaches, and the title was apt for this new book which was to be all about things which are found in or by the sea. Reg writes that, as with *The Cat and the Cuckoo*, "the results of our non-co-operation, if I may call it that, were quite amazing, especially the wreck poem and picture. Ted, Danny Weissbort and myself had walked to Hartland Cliffs where the ship 'Johanna' had come ashore and was now well rusted. The twisted metal plates standing on end suggested some sort of growth – have a look again at the poem"²¹.

Wreck

Like their two earlier books, *The Mermaid's Purse* was originally intended to be for children, but Reg had come to see that these books were rather like small catalogues for his own, larger, art works, so he deliberately made the illustrations for this book more 'adult' and closer to his normal style. Ted, too, did not believe that children's poetry should be childish, but he found *The Mermaid's Purse* poems more difficult to write than those for *The Cat and the Cuckoo*. "It's hard to write a quantity of poems about sea-creatures", he told me, "Some of them are so cold and prickly for children". Reg, too, according to Ted, found them "chilly"²², but his illustrations are beautiful and many of them include the 'heavenly light' which had so struck Ted in the plates for *What is the Truth?*.

They had more success with *The Mermaid's Purse*, which was published in May 1993. The Independent newspaper chose it as their 'Book of the Week' and the whole edition of 100 books was sold within twenty-four hours. Mermaid's Purse Title PageHowever, the planned boxed set of four volumes of books for children was never produced.

Faber and Faber offered to take on *The Mermaid's Purse* for publication as a trade edition but, Ted said, they wanted to publish it with a different artist's illustrations or to be paid to use Reg's. So they never took up this offer²³.

Ted's and Reg's next collaborative book, *Earth Dances*, came about after Nicolas and Frances McDowall of The Old Stile Press suggested to Reg that he illustrate a book for them with text from various different authors on the subject of stones and stone circles. They made suggestions for the text which "did not set him on fire", so Reg asked Ted if he could make his own selection of Ted's poems and illustrate them. Ted agreed, and The Old Stile Press "jumped at the idea".

Earth Dances is a book about the land. Reg writes that he "enjoyed making the selection [of poems], Ted didn't interfere in any way". He then cut the lino blocks for his pictures, and Nicolas McDowall printed them,²⁴ and designed and printed the book. As for *The Mermaid's Purse*, Reg's pictures were more sophisticated than those for *What is the Truth?* and *The Cat and the Cuckoo*. An Old Stile Press advertisement describes them as "wonderfully decorative lino-cut images, some of which take full pages while others are interwoven with poems on the text pages". It goes on to say: "Ted Hughes

also wrote a new poem, 'Epigraph'²⁵ for his friend R.J. Lloyd and especially for inclusion in this book. It evokes the wild moorland country which has so often inspired both poet and painter in their work"²⁶.

As with many fine-art, limited edition books, each production involved poet, artist, printers, binders and papermakers. The paper on which the books were printed was always carefully chosen and Reg comments that "the "Mermaid's Purse" would have been better printed on harder paper. The illustrations are not at their best". The paper for *Earth Dances* was especially interesting. The Old Stile Press Bibliography notes that eight of the nine illustrations were printed on four different papers made by Frances McDowall and these incorporated iris, nettle, onion, Japanese knotweed, pampas grass and alkanet fibres. In a talk about papermaking which Frances gave in 2007, she describes how Reg "had seen some of the papers I was making and wanted to use some made from different plants for his images for some of Ted Hughes nature poems. This was an exciting project - however, it would require 10 sheets for each of 250 copies of *Earth Dances*. So I selected plants, cooked them, 'beat' them in a couple of domestic liquidisers together with an old butter churn redundant from N's parents' farm (which bashed rather than cutting the fibres). The plant fibres were mixed with some offcuts from papers already used in the press (so of good cotton fibres). It is a project such as this that pushes one over that barrier between an amateur and a committed craftsperson"²⁷.

Earth Dances

Earth Dances was published in December 1994. After that, Reg says "Ted and I talked about future books, one to be entitled 'Rubbish', and we were exploring the possibility of 'Gawain and the Green Knight'. The latter appealed to me greatly. With the 'Rubbish' book, I had already started to make notes. Oh well, it was not to be".

Ted's collaboration and friendship with Reg Lloyd was clearly a mutually satisfying experience. Reg remembers Ted as a kind and generous friend: and Ted clearly admired Reg's art and saw in it the same "root-system" running "back into the land itself, and into the cyclic natural world"²⁸ as inspired his own creations. "There were long periods when, because of our various commitments, we did not see each other", Reg writes, but Ted "would always sing 'Happy Birthday' over the phone on the 21st December. My birthday always intrigued Ted being the winter solstice".

Clearly, throughout Ted's life there were artistic collaborations which he found satisfying and inspiring. In spite of this, Ted amazed me on two separate occasions by saying that he did not like poetry and pictures published together. This was not just because artists tended to think that their work would be ignored or regarded simply as illustrations to Ted's poems, but because Ted himself often thought the opposite was true. Fay Godwin recalled that Ted wanted his poem printed larger than was originally planned for their Elmet books, so that they were not "swamped by the photographs"²⁹.

Ted's concern, however, was based on his own reading and understanding of the way in which the human brain works. Words and pictures, he told me, "are processed by

different parts of the brain and this causes conflict in the reader, and upsets his or her concentration". Research, too, he said, suggests that image is dominant, and poetry, when it is only seen on the page, is processed by a part of the brain which is disconnected from the visceral auditory part of the brain - the most primitive part which controls the harmony of the whole body. For this reason, Ted believed that poetry should always be read aloud³⁰.

Given the number and frequency of Ted's artistic collaborations and the way in which the art and poetry in these works generally complement and illuminate each other, Ted's reservations about poetry and pictures appearing together were surprising. However, he also told me that he did enjoy responding to art work and that was why his limited editions were always illustrated and why, as with the Morrighu Press publications, he even did some of the illustrations himself.

With trade editions of his work Ted had no choice. Publishers, he said, were of the view that children's books, in particular, would only sell if they were illustrated and, as with *The Mermaid's Purse* and *Earth Dances*, they had very definite ideas about what sort of illustrations would be suitable. Fortunately, he was generally pleased with the work of the artists the publishers chose.

In the years between 1969 and his death in 1998, Ted explored and experimented with many different ways of publishing his poetry³¹. Full descriptions of his collaborative, limited edition publications, which include work with many different artists and small Presses³², can be found in Sagar.K, and Tabor, S. *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography 1946-1995*, Mansell, 1998.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. R. J. Lloyd and Ted Hughes. Unpublished memoir enclosed with an e-mail from Reg Lloyd to Ann Skea, 25 Nov. 2009.
2. Catalogue for New Prints by R.J. Lloyd with Poems by Ted Hughes and John Moat. 26 Aug. - 12 Sept. 1970. At the Irving Gallery, 21 Bridgeland St. Bideford 4270.
3. 'The Unknown Wren', Hughes, T. Adam and the Sacred Nine, Rainbow Press, 1979: Keegan, P. (Ed.), *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, Faber, 2003. pp. 447-8.
4. See my online discussion of Adam and the Sacred Nine as a cabbalistic drama : [./AdamHome.html](http://AdamHome.html)
5. Hughes, T. *What is the Truth?*, Faber, 1984. pp. 85, 125.
6. Michael Morpurgo is the well-known author of children's books. In 1974 he and his wife Clare founded the charity Farms for City Children. Ted was the first President of this charity . Michael Morpurgo talks about the farms.

7. Reid, C. (Ed) Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. Hughes to Gammage. 29 Nov. 1989. pp. 571-2.
8. Hughes/ Baskin correspondence, 9. Nov. 1983. British Library. Add. mss. 83684-83698.
9. 'In these fading moments...', Keegan,P. (Ed.), op.cit. p.423.
10. Ibid. 'Tick Tock Tick Tock', p.490.
11. Hughes, T. 'What Is The Truth? And the Collected Animal Poems', Classroom Choice, Issue 2, Poetry Book Society, Autumn 1995.
12. Hughes to Gammage, 29 Nov. 1989, in Reid, C. (Ed), op.cit. pp. 571-2.
13. Hughes, T. 'Preface'. R.J.Lloyd: A Retrospective Exhibition of Selected Works, Hereford City Museum and Art Gallery, 1996. pp.vi-vii.
14. Ted made the selection for Collected Animal Poems in 1995 and the posthumously published collections simply followed Ted's lead. The illustrations, the box and the covers were chosen by the Estate and by Faber & Faber. Letter from Carol Hughes to Ann Skea, 31 March 2012.
15. Skea, A. Notebooks and diaries, 1992. British Library, Add MS 88978/1: Ann Skea Notebooks: 9 Oct 1992-Jan 1999.
16. Ibid.
17. Sagar, K. (Ed.) Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, The British Library, 2012. p. 236.
18. Reid. C. (Ed.), op.cit. p.572.
19. The book is also dedicated to Daniel Hews [sic.], Sebastian Clarke, and Hugh and Toby Norton-Smith.
20. Ted's original list of 30 subjects survives and includes "Bladderwrack", "Shrimp", "Thriff", "Sandflea", "Stranded Whale" and "High Tide Rubbish". Scribbled on the same sheet are a couple of brief off-the-cuff rhymes, one about an otter, one about Louise and Reg Lloyd.
21. 'Wreck', Ted Hughes Collected Poems for Children, Faber, 2005, p.7. The drawings in this book are by Raymond Briggs and are nothing like Reg Lloyd's evocative paintings in The Mermaid's Purse.
22. Skea, A. Notebooks and diaries. 24 Aug. 1993. British Library. op.cit.

23. Skea, A. Notebooks and diaries, Oct. 1992. British Library, op.cit. Faber did publish The Mermaid's Purse in 1999 (after Ted's death) with illustrations by Flora McDowell.

24. Louise Lloyd writes that "Reg had the lino cuts printed separately which he sold in sets after the book had sold out".

25. Keegan, P. (Ed.). op.cit. p. 852.

26. The Old Stile Press.

27. McDowall, F. Transcript of a talk given to the IAPA at Wadham College, Oxford, 2007. A talk by Frances about her paper making. This article also contains an image of the title pages of Earth Dances which include one of Reg's lino-cut images.

28. Hughes, T. 'Preface'. op cit. p.iv.

29. Gifford. T. 'Interview with Fay Godwin: transcript', Thumbscrew 18, Spring 2001.

30. In a letter to Daniel Huws in April 1957, Ted explained this view more fully. Reid, C. (Ed.), op.cit. pp.96-7.

31. Reg Lloyd has a poem written by Ted on a table napkin – a means of circulating poetry which Ted once suggested to Daniel Weissbort.

32. Ted is listed among the founders and directors of The Rougemount Press (1970-1974), Exeter, together with Eric Cleave, Moelwyn Merchant and Paul Merchant. Ted wrote introductions to two of their publications: Fiesta Melons by Sylvia Plath and Stones: poems by Paul Merchant.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options.](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitionalfox

A Creative Collaboration: R. J. Lloyd and Ted Hughes

(My thanks to R. J. Lloyd, Louise Lloyd, Carol Hughes and Frances McDowall).

© Ann Skea.

In the years between 1959 and his death in 1998, Ted explored and experimented with many different ways of publishing his poetry and his desire to find an inexpensive, reliable way of making poetry easily available to everyone never diminished. In the course of his experimentation, he collaborated with a number of artists and publishers to produce broadsides, posters, books, and pamphlets in limited editions. Some of these collaborations, like that with his long-time friend, Leonard Baskin, are well-known and

well documented. Others, like his equally successful work with R. J. Lloyd between 1970 and 1994 are not.

Reg Lloyd is primarily a painter but he works in many media, including stained-glass, pottery and printmaking. He and Ted first met through a mutual friend and they first found common ground in childhood memories of a shop bell ringing: Reg's parents had owned a drapers shop and Ted's parents had been newsagents. From this slight beginning they discovered that they shared other interests and their friendship developed. Then, some time in the mid-sixties, a suggestion was made that they should work together to produce posters and broadsides. Reg had already started work on some silk-screen prints and they both liked the idea, so, their collaboration began.

Ted gave Reg four poems: 'King of Carrion', 'That Moment', 'Crow's Last Stand' and 'Crow and the Birds', and Reg recalls that he "printed the text on an old Hercules poster press using wooden typeface, then added the silkscreen decorations. These were produced in a very limited edition of twenty copies of each, which were subsequently included in my exhibition of silkscreen prints and monotypes at the Irving Galley, Bideford, in August 1970¹". Poems by Ted Hughes and John Moat were included in this exhibition and the exhibition catalogue noted that the poets provided "themes for some of the suites" of prints, "adding a deeper dimension of meaning". It went on to say that Reg's prints were "not illustrations of the poetry but, rather, extensions of the mood evoked by the words – a partnership of word and image"².

"Time went on with mutual visits", writes Reg. "Ted would bring his latest works and I became bold enough to suggest that Baskin's work was too much akin to Ted's, to which he agreed and, indeed, wrote in the copy of *Cave Birds* which he gave me 'A cockfight in poetry'". But it was Carol Hughes who first suggested that Reg should look at the manuscript of *What is the Truth?* with a view to illustrating it. "I looked", says Reg, "and decided to have a go. Sent some specimens to Fabers and they commissioned me to carry on. I'm not sure what the contract arrangements were at the time but there didn't seem to be any limitations as to how many illustrations there were to be. So Fabers sent me the galleys.... All that was decided was the format, so I chopped up the galleys and reassembled them to fit around my illustrations".

WITcover

Reg designed and illustrated the whole book and on the cover, knowing of Ted's superstitions and that Ted would remember the old rhyme 'One for Sorrow, Two for Joy...', he added a tiny extra magpie to his drawing. Ted also asked him to include a wren somewhere in the book. Although the Jenny Wren is only briefly mentioned in the text, the wren is an important bird in English mythology, a sacred oracle bird, King of the birds and representative of the fertile energies of nature. Ted described it vividly in *Adam and the Sacred Nine*³, where it is one of the 'angelic powers' which visit Adam to awaken him to spiritual life⁴. So Reg provided two wrens. One appears opposite the page associated with the Christmas Goose and the two muddy-footed goose "queens", the other at the end of the book amongst all the 'holy' animals⁵.

What is the Truth?, which was published by Faber in 1984, was marketed as a children's book and won the Guardian's Children's Fiction award for that year. It was dedicated to Clare and Michael Morpurgo, friends and Devon farming neighbours of Ted's who had first suggested the project to him⁶. Written in poetry and prose, it is a fable in which the spirits of a sleeping "Farmer, his Wife, and Son and Daughter, the Vicar, the Poacher, the Schoolmaster and the Shepherd" each describe the different animals around them. Each description is a version of the truth about that animal, and each version reflects the speaker's own experience of the world. So, for example, the Farmer's wife describes the cow as a motherly creature, the Farmer sees cows as hard work, and their daughter sees only their gentle beauty. Each, as Ted wrote in 1989, "has his/her own idea of what any particular creature is, but none of them know that each one is actually God"⁷.

WITanimals

Writing to Baskin in November 1983, Ted called this book "my poems about animals for the infantile"⁸. He went on to say, only half ironically: "Every bard speaks for a tribe – mine is the Universal infantile, a mighty people". There are echoes here of the words of Ted's protagonist in Cave Birds, who claims to be "Imbecile Innocent"⁹; and of the people in Remains of Elmet whose "everlasting play"¹⁰ brought ruin to them and their enterprises. The importance of this fable to Ted and his special meaning of both 'infantile' and 'imbecile innocent' is clear in the explanation of What Is The Truth? which he provided for teachers in the Poetry Book Society's leaflet, Classroom Choice¹¹. His people, as he pointed out, are literally asleep but they are also spiritually unawakened: their versions of the Truth, therefore, are only partial. The real truth, revealed in the words of God at the end of the book, is the Blakean truth that everything that lives is holy: "I am each of these things....And each of these things is me". And Reg Lloyd's black and white illustrations convey the true beauty of even the most humble and the most maligned of creatures, such as the worm, the mosquito, the flea and the fly.

Ted's original idea for the book had been a more complicated story of the way in which God's Son learns about man's oppression of "the creatures he loves best". He described it in a letter to Nick Gammage in 1998 but went on to say that because the book was intended for Farms for City Children, in writing the poems he "relaxed this scheme....simply let the creatures blossom and obscured the first theme with another". So, the fable which he "floated" as "a carrier wave for transmission about creatures on a farm" became one about "the true divinity of creatures and man's inability to see that truth" ¹².

In his letter to Baskin, Ted wrote that the book was "really charming, richly illustrated" and that Reg had done a "lovely job...Far and away his best work, I think". Years later, in an introduction which Ted wrote for a retrospective exhibition of Reg's work at the Hereford City Museum and Art Gallery in 1996, the importance of Reg's illustrations as part of Ted's vision is clearer: "These were black and white drawings, but it struck me at the time, there is hardly a plate in the book without its heavenly light – a moon or sun. Even the worms, in one of the best, seem to be worshipping the rising sun. One way or another, he has made each of these creatures a sacred figure"¹³.

Sadly, in the later Faber publications *Collected Animal Poems* (1995); *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems* (2003); and *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems for Children* (2005), the poems appear without the connecting story and without Reg Lloyd's illustrations¹⁴.

After *What Is The Truth?*, Reg suggested to Ted that they do another "small richly-coloured book about familiar creatures" and publish it themselves. Ted spoke to me of this as their "naughty adventure" outside the Faber fold¹⁵; and Reg writes that they "decided to go it alone (much to Fabers' annoyance) under their own imprint 'The Sunstone Press'". Ted simply wrote out a possible list of subjects and I went away and did my paintings and Ted did his poems. The results were quite uncanny sometimes, as though some mysterious cross fertilisation had taken place". C&C Cover

The result of this venture was *The Cat and the Cuckoo*, which they published in 1987 as a limited edition of 2,000 books, 250 of which were numbered and signed by both artist and poet. In addition, a series of 28 separate sheets was published, each reproducing one of Reg's paintings and the accompanying poem by Ted. Reg designed and illustrated the book. He also designed the Sunstone Press imprint, and the advertising flyer which contained small images of all 28 of the paintings and, like the cover of the book, featured Reg's picture of the Lloyd family cat, Tim. The first printing of Ted's poem 'Cat' appeared on the back of the flyer.

C&C title page

Reg's prints were exhibited at Senate House in London, Exeter University and the Barnstaple Library, Sterts Arts centre in Cornwall and a number of National Trust houses, and order forms and prints were made available at each. Originally Ted and Reg had planned to produce four books in *The Cat and the Cuckoo* format so that they could be boxed together but production and distribution proved to be more difficult and more expensive than anticipated. Eventually, they took up the offer of a new printing of 2,000 copies of *The Cat and the Cuckoo* for "a bargain price", but were unable to sell them. "We had to go cap-in-hand to Fabers and get them to take it on", Ted told me: and Fabers "spoiled the plan"¹⁶. In a letter to Keith Sagar in October 1993, Ted wrote: "Faber had about 2,000 Cats and Cuckoos for two years and never sold one. Eventually Reg and I took them back. He's selling his in fifties to art galleries, National Trust shops etc."¹⁷. Reg cannot recall selling the book in fifties to galleries, but he did give them away to schools or children's charities and, at the time of writing his memoir (2009), he still had some for sale.

In his letter to Nick Gammage in 1998, Ted wrote that after writing about the animals in *What is the Truth?*, "eventually I tried again, with 'The Cat and the Cuckoo'....Mainly, I wanted to write pieces that would make it easier (even easier?) for readers - urban readers - to like these creatures. Or to share my liking. Or to make something pleasurable out of describing my liking"¹⁸. An important part of the dedication in *The Cat and the Cuckoo* is to "all the children who visit FARMS FOR CITY CHILDREN"¹⁹.

The next book on which Ted and Reg collaborated was *The Mermaid's Purse*. Again,

this book was to be their own Sunstone Press publication; and again Ted wrote a list of possible subjects²⁰, then Reg did his paintings and Ted wrote the poems. Reg chose the title and painted an image of a Mermaid's Purse for the label on the slip-cover of the book. Mermaid's Purse Slip CaseA Mermaid's Purse (sometimes also known as a Devil's Purse) is the collagenous egg-case which surrounds the fertilized eggs of some sharks, dolphins, skate, and an ancient order of fish known as 'Chimera'. The empty cases are frequently washed up on beaches, and the title was apt for this new book which was to be all about things which are found in or by the sea. Reg writes that, as with *The Cat and the Cuckoo*, "the results of our non-co-operation, if I may call it that, were quite amazing, especially the wreck poem and picture. Ted, Danny Weissbort and myself had walked to Hartland Cliffs where the ship 'Johanna' had come ashore and was now well rusted. The twisted metal plates standing on end suggested some sort of growth – have a look again at the poem"²¹.

Wreck

Like their two earlier books, *The Mermaid's Purse* was originally intended to be for children, but Reg had come to see that these books were rather like small catalogues for his own, larger, art works, so he deliberately made the illustrations for this book more 'adult' and closer to his normal style. Ted, too, did not believe that children's poetry should be childish, but he found *The Mermaid's Purse* poems more difficult to write than those for *The Cat and the Cuckoo*. "It's hard to write a quantity of poems about sea-creatures", he told me, "Some of them are so cold and prickly for children". Reg, too, according to Ted, found them "chilly"²², but his illustrations are beautiful and many of them include the 'heavenly light' which had so struck Ted in the plates for *What is the Truth?*.

They had more success with *The Mermaid's Purse*, which was published in May 1993. The *Independent* newspaper chose it as their 'Book of the Week' and the whole edition of 100 books was sold within twenty-four hours. Mermaid's Purse Title PageHowever, the planned boxed set of four volumes of books for children was never produced.

Faber and Faber offered to take on *The Mermaid's Purse* for publication as a trade edition but, Ted said, they wanted to publish it with a different artist's illustrations or to be paid to use Reg's. So they never took up this offer²³.

Ted's and Reg's next collaborative book, *Earth Dances*, came about after Nicolas and Frances McDowall of The Old Stile Press suggested to Reg that he illustrate a book for them with text from various different authors on the subject of stones and stone circles. They made suggestions for the text which "did not set him on fire", so Reg asked Ted if he could make his own selection of Ted's poems and illustrate them. Ted agreed, and The Old Stile Press "jumped at the idea".

Earth Dances is a book about the land. Reg writes that he "enjoyed making the selection [of poems], Ted didn't interfere in any way". He then cut the lino blocks for his pictures, and Nicolas McDowall printed them,²⁴ and designed and printed the book. As for *The Mermaid's Purse*, Reg's pictures were more sophisticated than those for *What is*

the Truth? and The Cat and the Cuckoo. An Old Stile Press advertisement describes them as “wonderfully decorative lino-cut images, some of which take full pages while others are interwoven with poems on the text pages”. It goes on to say: “Ted Hughes also wrote a new poem, ‘Epigraph’²⁵ for his friend R.J. Lloyd and especially for inclusion in this book. It evokes the wild moorland country which has so often inspired both poet and painter in their work”²⁶.

As with many fine-art, limited edition books, each production involved poet, artist, printers, binders and papermakers. The paper on which the books were printed was always carefully chosen and Reg comments that “the “Mermaid’s Purse” would have been better printed on harder paper. The illustrations are not at their best”. The paper for *Earth Dances* was especially interesting. The Old Stile Press Bibliography notes that eight of the nine illustrations were printed on four different papers made by Frances McDowall and these incorporated iris, nettle, onion, Japanese knotweed, pampas grass and alkanet fibres. In a talk about papermaking which Frances gave in 2007, she describes how Reg “had seen some of the papers I was making and wanted to use some made from different plants for his images for some of Ted Hughes nature poems. This was an exciting project - however, it would require 10 sheets for each of 250 copies of *Earth Dances*. So I selected plants, cooked them, ‘beat’ them in a couple of domestic liquidisers together with an old butter churn redundant from N’s parents’ farm (which bashed rather than cutting the fibres). The plant fibres were mixed with some offcuts from papers already used in the press (so of good cotton fibres). It is a project such as this that pushes one over that barrier between an amateur and a committed craftsman”²⁷.

Earth Dances

Earth Dances was published in December 1994. After that, Reg says “Ted and I talked about future books, one to be entitled ‘Rubbish’, and we were exploring the possibility of ‘Gawain and the Green Knight’. The latter appealed to me greatly. With the ‘Rubbish’ book, I had already started to make notes. Oh well, it was not to be”.

Ted’s collaboration and friendship with Reg Lloyd was clearly a mutually satisfying experience. Reg remembers Ted as a kind and generous friend: and Ted clearly admired Reg’s art and saw in it the same “root-system” running “back into the land itself, and into the cyclic natural world”²⁸ as inspired his own creations. “There were long periods when, because of our various commitments, we did not see each other”, Reg writes, but Ted “would always sing ‘Happy Birthday’ over the phone on the 21st December. My birthday always intrigued Ted being the winter solstice”.

Clearly, throughout Ted’s life there were artistic collaborations which he found satisfying and inspiring. In spite of this, Ted amazed me on two separate occasions by saying that he did not like poetry and pictures published together. This was not just because artists tended to think that their work would be ignored or regarded simply as illustrations to Ted’s poems, but because Ted himself often thought the opposite was true. Fay Godwin recalled that Ted wanted his poem printed larger than was originally planned for their *Elmet* books, so that they were not “swamped by the photographs”²⁹.

Ted's concern, however, was based on his own reading and understanding of the way in which the human brain works. Words and pictures, he told me, "are processed by different parts of the brain and this causes conflict in the reader, and upsets his or her concentration". Research, too, he said, suggests that image is dominant, and poetry, when it is only seen on the page, is processed by a part of the brain which is disconnected from the visceral auditory part of the brain - the most primitive part which controls the harmony of the whole body. For this reason, Ted believed that poetry should always be read aloud³⁰.

Given the number and frequency of Ted's artistic collaborations and the way in which the art and poetry in these works generally complement and illuminate each other, Ted's reservations about poetry and pictures appearing together were surprising. However, he also told me that he did enjoy responding to art work and that was why his limited editions were always illustrated and why, as with the Morrighu Press publications, he even did some of the illustrations himself.

With trade editions of his work Ted had no choice. Publishers, he said, were of the view that children's books, in particular, would only sell if they were illustrated and, as with *The Mermaid's Purse* and *Earth Dances*, they had very definite ideas about what sort of illustrations would be suitable. Fortunately, he was generally pleased with the work of the artists the publishers chose.

In the years between 1969 and his death in 1998, Ted explored and experimented with many different ways of publishing his poetry³¹. Full descriptions of his collaborative, limited edition publications, which include work with many different artists and small Presses³², can be found in Sagar.K, and Tabor, S. *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography 1946-1995*, Mansell, 1998.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. R. J. Lloyd and Ted Hughes. Unpublished memoir enclosed with an e-mail from Reg Lloyd to Ann Skea, 25 Nov. 2009.
2. Catalogue for New Prints by R.J. Lloyd with Poems by Ted Hughes and John Moat. 26 Aug. - 12 Sept. 1970. At the Irving Gallery, 21 Bridgeland St. Bideford 4270.
3. 'The Unknown Wren', Hughes, T. Adam and the Sacred Nine, Rainbow Press, 1979: Keegan, P. (Ed.), *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, Faber, 2003. pp. 447-8.
4. See my online discussion of Adam and the Sacred Nine as a cabbalistic drama : [./AdamHome.html](http://AdamHome.html)
5. Hughes, T. *What is the Truth?*, Faber, 1984. pp. 85, 125.
6. Michael Morpurgo is the well-known author of children's books. In 1974 he and his

wife Clare founded the charity Farms for City Children. Ted was the first President of this charity . Michael Morpurgo talks about the farms.

7. Reid, C. (Ed) Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. Hughes to Gammage. 29 Nov. 1989. pp. 571-2.

8. Hughes/ Baskin correspondence, 9. Nov. 1983. British Library. Add. mss. 83684-83698.

9. 'In these fading moments...', Keegan,P. (Ed.), op.cit. p.423.

10. Ibid. 'Tick Tock Tick Tock', p.490.

11. Hughes, T. 'What Is The Truth? And the Collected Animal Poems', Classroom Choice, Issue 2, Poetry Book Society, Autumn 1995.

12. Hughes to Gammage, 29 Nov. 1989, in Reid, C. (Ed), op.cit. pp. 571-2.

13. Hughes, T. 'Preface'. R.J.Lloyd: A Retrospective Exhibition of Selected Works, Hereford City Museum and Art Gallery, 1996. pp.vi-vii.

14. Ted made the selection for Collected Animal Poems in 1995 and the posthumously published collections simply followed Ted's lead. The illustrations, the box and the covers were chosen by the Estate and by Faber & Faber. Letter from Carol Hughes to Ann Skea, 31 March 2012.

15. Skea, A. Notebooks and diaries, 1992. British Library, Add MS 88978/1: Ann Skea Notebooks: 9 Oct 1992-Jan 1999.

16. Ibid.

17. Sagar, K. (Ed.) Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, The British Library, 2012. p. 236.

18. Reid. C. (Ed.), op.cit. p.572.

19. The book is also dedicated to Daniel Hews [sic.], Sebastian Clarke, and Hugh and Toby Norton-Smith.

20. Ted's original list of 30 subjects survives and includes "Bladderwrack", "Shrimp", "Thriff", "Sandflea", "Stranded Whale" and "High Tide Rubbish". Scribbled on the same sheet are a couple of brief off-the-cuff rhymes, one about an otter, one about Louise and Reg Lloyd.

21. 'Wreck', Ted Hughes Collected Poems for Children, Faber, 2005, p.7. The drawings in this book are by Raymond Briggs and are nothing like Reg Lloyd's evocative

paintings in *The Mermaid's Purse*.

22. Skea, A. Notebooks and diaries. 24 Aug. 1993. British Library. op.cit.

23. Skea, A. Notebooks and diaries, Oct. 1992. British Library, op.cit. Faber did publish *The Mermaid's Purse* in 1999 (after Ted's death) with illustrations by Flora McDowell.

24. Louise Lloyd writes that "Reg had the lino cuts printed separately which he sold in sets after the book had sold out".

25. Keegan, P. (Ed.). op.cit. p. 852.

26. The Old Stile Press.

27. McDowall, F. Transcript of a talk given to the IAPA at Wadham College, Oxford, 2007. A talk by Frances about her paper making. This article also contains an image of the title pages of *Earth Dances* which include one of Reg's lino-cut images.

28. Hughes, T. 'Preface'. op cit. p.iv.

29. Gifford. T. 'Interview with Fay Godwin: transcript', *Thumbscrew* 18, Spring 2001.

30. In a letter to Daniel Huws in April 1957, Ted explained this view more fully. Reid, C. (Ed.), op.cit. pp.96-7.

31. Reg Lloyd has a poem written by Ted on a table napkin – a means of circulating poetry which Ted once suggested to Daniel Weissbort.

32. Ted is listed among the founders and directors of The Rougemount Press (1970-1974), Exeter, together with Eric Cleave, Moelwyn Merchant and Paul Merchant. Ted wrote introductions to two of their publications: *Fiesta Melons* by Sylvia Plath and *Stones: poems* by Paul Merchant.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Return to [The Ted Hughes Homepage](#) for more options.

Go to [Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalMoon-ark1Morrigu1

Ted Hughes and Small Press Publication

(My thanks to Olwyn Hughes for her help and advice; to Mark Hinchliffe; and to his daughter, Sarah, whose photographs I have adapted for most of the images of Rainbow Press books used here).

© Ann Skea.

Addendum, November 2016:

Robin Skelton archive, University of Victoria, B.C. (SC114). In a letter from Ted Hughes to Robyn Skelton, c. Dec. 1962, Hughes writes of his own idea to edit and produce an annual or twice-yearly magazine devoted to translations of modern poetry of other languages. This letter was written a year before Daniel Weissbort's remembered conversation with Hughes about this subject on New Year's Eve 1963/4. The first edition of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, with an editorial written by Hughes, appeared in October 1965.

In his 'Programme Notes' for the first Arts Council Poetry International Festival in 1965, Ted Hughes expressed the view that poetry is "a universal language of understanding in which we can all hope to meet"¹. This was a belief he had long held, and all his adult life he had a fierce desire to make poetry more popular and more easily available to everyone. In an interview at the Adelaide Festival Book Week in 1976, he spoke of the way in which countries like Hungary or Russia published thousands of copies of poems and how "it's not a few teachers and fellow-writers that read it, which is the case here, [Australia] and the case in England very largely. It's everybody every truck-driver has a book of poetry lying around in his cab"². The problem, as he saw it, was the expensive way in which poetry books were published in England. "Why don't they publish soft-cover books for book-lovers as they do in France?", he complained to me in 1992.³

.

Lucas Myers, who first met Ted at Cambridge University in 1954, remembers that even then he talked about the need for cheap poetry publications. One of Ted's ideas, Lucas says in his memoir, *Crow Steered Bergs Appeared*, was to "encouraging someone to found a poetry magazine that would be issued in tabloid format and sold for threepence a copy"⁴. He also talked of establishing two periodicals, each so cheap that anyone could buy them.

Daniel Weissbort, too, remembers that Ted was always full of ideas on this subject. At a New Years Eve party in 1963/4, Ted had a long conversation with him during which he talked in more detail about establishing two journals, one for English poetry (possibly produced so cheaply that it could be made available "at each check-out counter in supermarkets"⁵) and a second to be "devoted solely to translations of contemporary foreign poetry into English"⁶. A journal of this second kind suited Daniel's own particular interests so, encouraged by Ted, he followed up the idea. This resulted in the publication, in October 1965, of the first issue of *Modern Poetry In Translation* (MPT)⁷.

There was, at that time, a sudden, growing interest in translations of foreign poetry, and Ted was actively involved in helping to organize the first Arts Council International Poetry Festival, which had also been his own idea. In spite of some resistance to the concept of inviting foreign poets to take part in a British poetry festival, the Arts Council

had ultimately agreed to his plans. Daniel recalls that “the first idea was to tie [MPT] in to the international poetry festivals and persuade the festival committee, of which Ted was a key member, to allot money to purchase lots of copies including the programme for ‘free’ distribution. i.e. to budget for this in the cost of the ticket!”⁸.

Ted, himself, remembered that they toyed with “the fantasy of sending to every known poet – offering to their curiosity – a free copy of each issue”. Unfortunately, that fantasy “evaporated with the first bill”: it was, however, responsible for the format of the first issue: “a flimsy newspaper (the first issue was on rice paper) that would never seem to demand more than a cursory scanning, and wouldn’t much resist being thrown away. Functional, current, disposable – such were our key words”⁹. So disposable was this format intended to be, in fact, that another fantasy of Ted’s was to print it “on table napkins, so that it became available in cafes and restaurants ensuring that it was at least glanced at by people as they wiped their mouths”¹⁰.

Reality soon intervened, because the rice-paper used for the first issue of Modern Poetry In Translation was unexpectedly expensive. “I’ve been thinking all along of a fairly scrappy looking thing”, Ted wrote to Daniel when he saw the first estimates, but “the cost sounds terribly steep”¹¹. Nor was the process of producing the magazine trouble free. By September 1965, Ted was complaining to Daniel and Helga Huws that the magazine was “suddenly emerging to show us its real dimensions – an absolute horror of business, correspondence, sub-officials, agents, & hurry.”¹².

Richard Hollis, who was responsible for designing and printing MPT, recalls that the format chosen was that of the pacifist magazine Peace News and that they used the same printer¹³. In a panel discussion in 2010, Hollis also remembered that he had at that time just returned from South America where “the notion was that you could just hand out poems in the street, and it was free”. This, too, probably influenced Ted’s decisions about MPT.

In the end, that first tabloid-format MPT was printed on thin “bible-paper”, so that it could be cheaply air-mailed, and was priced at two shillings and six pence. Modern Poetry In Translation was, and has remained a success. But even if it did not fulfil all Ted’s dreams, he never gave up his efforts to make poetry more widely available to everyone.

In 1969, perhaps with William Blake’s illuminated books in mind, Ted told Daniel Weissbort that he was thinking of publishing “little editions”, using poems of his own and those of a few friends, and doing them “really beautifully – maybe very small, yes with woodcuts etc. in a small edition and a slightly larger edition, dirt cheap, in proof bound form” ¹⁴. Since there were already collectors interested in his own work, he thought that “one issue, signed, and sold for three guineas would float the first three securely”, and he suggested hopefully that the proof bound copies might eventually be sold at a price which would “undersell Penguin”. The germ of this idea would eventually come to fruition but not quite in the way Ted had envisaged, since it soon became apparent that really beautiful productions were never cheap.

Alan Sillitoe, in a memoir written shortly after Ted's death, tells of a dinner which he and his wife, Ruth Fainlight, had with Ted and his sister Olwyn at Court Green¹⁵. Wondering what to do about the deplorable fact that poetry was not "cheaply and more widely available", the four of them "spent the time over several bottles and a long dinner working out details of the Giveaway Press. Poems were to be printed on the cheapest of paper and sold on street corners for only a penny or two"¹⁶. Their reasoning, as Olwyn Hughes recalls, was that "poetry publications could be cheap without the big splendid offices, editors, etc. etc., of such as Faber". Sadly, they found that this was not true. The main problem was typesetting costs: "Type-setting (this was before computers...) and paper and binding made a short privately created run very expensive. We would have had to charge as much as a trade publisher but without their huge sales network"¹⁷.

Having given up the idea of producing cheap, widespread publications, it occurred to Ted and Olwyn that a possible alternative market for poetry would be fine, limited edition books. Initially, a joint venture between Ted and Daniel Weissbort was planned. Ted provided Daniel and his Viper Press partner, David Ross, with a small collection of Sylvia Plath's poems for their first publication, but Daniel was slow getting the project under way. So, Ted took back the poems, intending that he and Olwyn would publish them themselves.

Olwyn bought books of instructions from Mr Lawrence, "an aged expert in all things to do with print making and book making, in his 'Aladdin's Cave' in Bleeding Heart Yard. He had been for decades the main supplier to artists and tradesmen of the old crafts. He recommended the specialised books I had on the old craft of bookmaking, still practiced in production of fine editions. ... But they launched me on the splendid path of creating books – suiting their contents to the wide variety of hand made and mould made papers, types of binding, choice of backs – paper or leather etc. To the world of typefaces"¹⁸.

There is one famous literary precedent for this sort of brother-sister publishing collaboration, as Ted and Olwyn probably knew. Yeats' elder sister, Elizabeth, had been a member of William Morris's Arts and Crafts circle and had studied printing at the Women's Printing Studio in London. In 1908, she founded the Cuala Press in Dublin, where she designed and hand-printed beautiful, fine editions of work by her brother and other Irish writers. It was, as Olwyn noted, a purist press which did its own printing and binding etc.: the Hughes's used printers and binders, but "only the best we could find, the best paper and top binders".

Olwyn played the major role in the Rainbow Press Publications. She chose the printer and binder for each edition and mostly chose the paper on which it was to be printed. The hand made, decorative Japanese papers often used as endpapers or in the binding of the books were sent to her from Japan by her friend, Akira Minami, Professor of Literature at Kyoto, who was a scholar and translator of work by Sylvia and Ted.

Ted enjoyed being involved in the making of the books and had enormous creative force and energy. He watched over the Press productions and provided much of the material from his own writings. He was also knowledgeable about fonts, and would browse books of typefaces for pleasure. He had once sent a proof copy of one of Sylvia's books back to Faber requesting a larger, better typeface than the unsuitable, tiny print which Faber had chosen. And in 1993, when Faber published *Three Books*, Ted wrote to Keith Sagar that the poems "could not be worse in any other typeface...in future it will be a condition of my contract: typeface"¹⁹. So, Ted's approval was sought for the typefaces used in the Rainbow Press books and he selected a slightly bold Bodoni for his own works, as in the 'colours of the rainbow' series, which had also been his idea. The original plan for this special series was to publish sequences of short poems or a short prose passage in a standard format, all the same size (8" x 6"), using Italian mould made paper, similar typeface and bound in calf leather in the colours of the rainbow from indigo to red, but beginning with black and ending with white. Ultimately, only four of this special series were published: *Eat Crow*, *Prometheus on His Crag*, *Orts* and *Adam and the Sacred Nine*.

The Rainbow Press also had a lot of help from the American artist, Leonard Baskin, who had been a close friend of Ted's since he and Sylvia had lived in the USA. As Olwyn says, "It was a lucky thing indeed for Rainbow that the Baskins lived in Devon for much of the lifetime of the Press. A superb artist and also a great reader (not always the case with artists), his illustrations for the Rainbow books echoed their text admirably. As though that was not enough, Baskin was a great bookmaker himself with many years experience. His Gehenna Press is a famous one. He provided illustrations for many of [our] books, designed title pages of some, and completely designed *Pursuit*, for which he provided a superb new colophon"²⁰.

Olwyn also had advice from Sebastian Carter (who with his father, Will, printed just over half of the Rainbow Press titles at The Rampant Lions Press in Cambridge) when he was printing a book. Some of this advice she followed; some she did not, and often regretted it later. He, too, designed "an elegant colophon", which was used in *Lyonnesse*.

Others who helped were Keith Gossop, who was a founder member of Rainbow Press and with whom Olwyn was living when it was established. He helped generally with printers and binders; and later, Olwyn's husband Richard Thomas took charge of all the packing²¹.

The first publication to appear under The Rainbow Press imprint in March 1971 was *Crystal Gazer*, which contained twenty-three previously unpublished poems by Sylvia Plath, together with a single line drawing by Plath of one of the "corn vases" which she described in her journal and which is similar to the "boy" she drew there²². The drawing, which resembles a black-and-white lino-cut, shows a peasant girl in a European costume with her apron spilling vegetables, and a large, wicker collecting basket over her shoulder.

In an informative article about the Rainbow Press, Sebastian Carter comments that the first three titles (two of which were printed by the Daedalus Press in Norfolk) “had fairly ambitious runs of 300 to 400” books²³. Of this, Olwyn says: “I was keen to try out a variety of bindings etc. – I had Sangorski²⁴ do exquisite vellum binding in a solander box and a number bound in morocco. Too long a run and too much variety of binding were the lessons of CG. And of Lyonesse (similarly long and various). But I did learn a lot in the process. Choosing the right binding(s), the best typeface, the perfect paper the right printer and binder for each book was quite a creative enterprise. Having all those splendid craftsmen to draw on (and to meet) was a delight... The most enjoyable thing I’ve ever done”.

The second book, *Poems*, which appeared at the same time as *Crystal Gazer* contained eighteen uncollected poems by Ted, Ruth Fainlight and Alan Sillitoe, each of whom provide six poems. Ruth and Alan had been friends of Ted’s since he and Sylvia met them in 1960. Ruth’s brother, Harry, is the subject of Ted’s poem ‘To Be Harry’ (THCP 629). Embossed in real gold on the cover of this sumptuous book is an image of Isis: *Magnae Deorum Matris*. This was chosen by Ted and it is the same ancient image as hung in Ted’s and Sylvia’s flat and which Sylvia once described in a letter to her mother as “a lovely engraving of Isis from one of Ted’s astrological books” (SPLH 7 Feb.1960).

The third book published in 1971 was *Lyonesse*, which contained twenty-one previously unpublished poems by Sylvia Plath. A note inside the book indicates that a few of the poems would shortly be published in *Winter Trees* by Faber and Faber, London, and Harper and Row, N.Y. It is also noted that “two of Sylvia Plath’s manuscripts slightly enlarged form the end-papers in copies 1-100 only”. One of these hand-written drafts was of the title poem, ‘Lyonesse’; the second, which was advertised as being in the first 10 vellum bound copies only, was of Sylvia’s poem, ‘Child’.

Eat Crow, the fourth Rainbow Press publication, appeared in November 1971. This small, slim, black volume was the first of the planned series of ‘colours of the rainbow’ books. It is described in the Rainbow Press flyer as being the “first printing of a dramatic interlude” and it contains part of the script of *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*, a play which Ted had begun to write in 1965, and parts of which he had recently used with Peter Brook’s company of actors as improvisation exercises during their preparation for the performance of *Orghast* at the Shiraz Persepolis Festival²⁵. Unusually, the flyer for this publication states that “There will be no subsequent trade edition”.

Eat Crow is a surreal, nightmarish journey into the dark, chaotic otherworld of the human subconscious. In 1965, Ted had extracted a long passage from it to be published in the magazine, *Encounter*, as ‘X’²⁶. Early in 1971, the first part of this passage became the title poem of *Crow Wakes*, a Limited Edition book of poems which,

according to its publisher, Alan Tarling of the Poet & Printer Press, were, as Ted had told him, poems which had been excluded “for personal reasons” from *Crow: The Life and Songs of the Crow*, which Faber had published in 1970²⁷.

Eat Crow is not the same as the play entitled *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* which was broadcast by the BBC Third Programme in January 1963, but both were part of a longer play of that title. In a note amongst manuscripts in the British Library, Ted wrote of *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* as “A stage play which had the sub-title ‘a marriage in 17 murals’ ”²⁸. He described it to Ekbert Faas in 1970 as “a long waddling verse drama... partly based on Andreae’s *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*”²⁹ and, as he told Faas, the extract from *Eat Crow* (which had been published as ‘X’ and ‘Crow Wakes’) was originally “a speech made by the bride’s father who at the end of the day was petrified in a glass case. It’s his account of how he got into that condition”³⁰.

Eat Crow, ‘X’ and the poems in *Crow Wakes* are not an obvious part of the Crow story but they, like *Crow*, explore an horrific, amoral world of death, demons and animal energies which, in many ways, reflects the demonic visions of the Buddhist Bardo which are so vividly described in the Bardo Thodol – Tibetan Book of the Dead. Yet, this world of *Eat Crow* is our world, the world which Ted described in his 1959 libretto for the Bardo Thodol as the Buddhist “Wheel of Blood”: a world “Bound by evil Karma, bound by terror and longing / Resisting Grace”³¹. Into this deathly world in *Eat Crow*, comes a crow which, despite its “terrible black voice” is described in the play as “a sign of life” which “has come up from the maker of the world”.

1971 had been a busy year for the Rainbow Press. Each of the four publications required a great deal of work and then had to be sold. Olwyn remembers that there had been no special plan as to when a new book would appear but “Ted would just turn up with poems and say ‘Here’s another book’”³². The next Rainbow Press publication, *Prometheus On His Crag*, did not appear until November 1973.

Prometheus On His Crag was the second in the rainbow-coloured series and it is described in a Rainbow Press brochure printed in 1974 as being “in size and design... a twin volume to *EAT CROW*”. Of the 21 “new poems” in the book, three were excluded from the sequence published in Faber’s trade edition of *Moortown* in 1997, where three different poems were added³³. The sequence published in Faber’s *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems* in 2003 is that which appeared in *Moortown* and the three excluded poems are published in full in the Notes (pp. 1259-9)³⁴.

Pursuit, described as “A first edition of fifteen uncollected poems (with one exception)” by Sylvia Plath, appeared just four months after *Prometheus On His Crag*, in March 1974. This book was larger than those of the rainbow-coloured series and, because of its publishing history, Sebastian Carter described it as “a curious hybrid”³⁵. Baskin not only designed the book (which was contrary to the Rampant Lions Press’s usual policy of designing everything they print), he also chose the typeface and he designed the hand-lettered title page³⁶.

September and November 1974 saw the publication of two more books: *Spring Summer Autumn Winter*, which contained twenty of Ted's poems; and *Mandrakes* by Thom Gunn. Neither of these books was part of the special rainbow-coloured series, and each was highly distinctive in size and binding.

As is noted in *Spring Summer Autumn Winter*, five of the poems had already been published "in a small paper-bound edition" by Richard Gilberton of Bow, Devon, as *Five Autumn Songs for Children*. These had been written for, and sung at, the Little Missenden Harvest Festival in 1968.

Mandrakes, which appeared just two months later, contained ten new poems by Thom Gunn. Ted had known Gunn for some time. In 1962, Faber had published Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn together in *Selected Poems with Thom Gunn*, and in August 1962 Ted, Sylvia, Thom Gunn and Peter Porter had been recorded together as part of the series, *The Poet Speaks*, which was produced by the Lamont Library at Harvard University. Then, in 1963, Ted and Thom collaborated as editors of the Faber publication, *Five American Poets*. Christopher Reid, as editor of *Letters of Ted Hughes*, notes that although at the time Ted and Thom "were in no sense allies", they later grew friendly³⁷. Baskin provided five illustrations for this book.

The ninth Rainbow Press book, *Bog Poems* by Seamus Heaney, was completed and published in May 1975. The illustrator, Barrie Cooke, was a friend of Heaney's and a long-time naturalist and fisherman friend of Ted's. His distinctive images of bones and a bog-man, in charcoal and red-brown pigments, are a perfect accompaniment to Heaney's bog poems. Heaney, in his 'Foreword', writes that the linguistic origins of the word 'bog' are from the Norse word meaning 'soft'; and where he grew up in Ireland the bog was called "the Moss". These new poems, he says, "raised their heads out of my own ground".

All eight poems were later included in the Faber trade edition *North* in 1975, but Heaney dedicated the poems in the Rainbow Press book to Ted and Olwyn Hughes and Barrie Cooke for their "nurturing interest" in them. In 1975, Heaney was still a young poet, ten years younger than Ted, whose book, *Lupercal*, had first inspired him to seriously write poetry, but the two men became firm friends.

Earth-Moon, the next Rainbow Press publication, was unique in that Ted illustrated it himself. The book was small (5½ x 5½) and the two editions had the most beautiful and unusual covers. Olwyn chose a tiny, rounded, 9pt, Century Bold Schoolbook type for the poems and Sebastian Carter, who designed and printed the book, used blue and slate-blue inks for these on hand-made paper.

Ted's ten drawings of moon-creatures are as imaginative as his poems. Four great,

clawed, lizards, for example, surround a sliver of moon in the middle of 'Moon-walkers'; A big-beaked raven, surprisingly benign looking in spite of its fearsome claws, crouches opposite 'Moon ravens'; a dappled snake coils tightly around a quarter moon at the end of 'Moon-bells' (a poem which incorporates some of Ted's favourite parables); and a strange, distorted, spiked creature illustrates 'Moon-thorns'. A dragon-like moon-monster lifts its head to a quarter moon from its mountainous home at the end of 'Singing on the Moon'; and 'Moon-mares' has a picture of wild, rearing, flame-borne horses to accompany it.

The copy held by the British Library is inscribed by Olwyn to Leonard and Lisa Baskin for Christmas 1976, and inside the back cover is a hand-written extra poem and a drawing of "a lunar lune" by Ted.

Two years elapsed before the publication of Orts in the Spring of 1978.

The word, 'Orts', is a dialect word meaning 'leavings', and the Rainbow Press flyer describes the book as "A first edition of 63 poems many of which were written for the second part of Gaudete (Faber 1977) but not included therein". In fact, 19 of these poems were written in 1973-4 and were inspired by Ted's reading of A.K. Ramanujan's translations of sacred Southern Indian vacanas in his book *Speaking of Siva*³⁸. Of the 96 poems Ted wrote at that time, 18 appeared in the Epilogue of Gaudete, 19 in Orts, and the rest remain unpublished³⁹. The size of the book and the style of binding conform to the pattern of the rainbow-coloured series, and Baskin's illustration of a human face inside a rat's head makes a dramatic Frontespiece.

Moortown Elegies, which was published that same year (in October 1978) was a very personal book, dedicated to the memory of Carol Hughes' father Jack Orchard, with whom Ted had farmed Moortown Farm⁴⁰. On the cover, blocked in gold, is Ted's own drawing of a bull; and the Baskin drawing (which is placed opposite the poem 'Hands', which Ted had written in remembrance of Carol's Father) is inscribed "For Carol". It contains "35 mostly unpublished poems and passages" from a verse journal which Ted had kept while farming in Devon.

Just four months later, in February 1979, Adam and the Sacred Nine, the fourth and last book in the rainbow-coloured series, was published. The poems chart a cabbalistic journey which ends with the awakening of Adam and opposite its title page is Baskin's drawing of a phoenix rising from its fiery nest. This is the same image as that which appears as an end-plate in the 1979 Faber trade edition of Moortown.

Next, in April 1979, came Remains of Elmet, which is described in the flyer as "62 new poems about that part of the Yorkshire Pennines, close to Bronte country, where the author spent his boyhood. The area was once part of the ancient kingdom of Elmet". The flyer went on to note that there were "certain textual differences and one long poem not included in the coming trade edition".

Remains of Elmet is dedicated to Ted's mother, Edith Farrar, and the Rainbow Press edition contains four photographs by Fay Godwin. Sebastian Carter chose the Stellar Press at Hatfield to reproduce these photographs and Fay Godwin thought "the photo-reproduction in Rainbow very fine (better than Faber)"⁴¹.

The Faber trade edition of Remains of Elmet, which appeared in October of 1979, contained all but one of the poems in the Rainbow Press edition ('Wycollar Hall') but in a slightly different order, together with sixty-three of Fay Godwin's photographs.

The third Rainbow Press publication in 1979 was the slim, hand-stitched booklet containing the text of Ted's tribute to Henry Williamson, which Ted had given at the Service of Thanksgiving in the Royal Parish Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields on 1st December 1977.

In 1977, Ted wrote to his brother, Gerald, that this address was "a sort of tribute" which he had "once read... at a little celebration" whilst Williamson was still alive, and Williamson's daughters had asked him to read it again at the Memorial Service⁴². In his tribute, Ted spoke of Williamson as having been "an essential and precious part of my life, in some ways, a crucial part". Ted had found Williamson's book, Tarka the Otter, in his school library when he was an eleven-year-old, and he had read it so often that he almost knew it by heart. "It entered into me", he said, "and gave shape and words to my world as no book ever has done since." And he spoke of it as "something of a holy book, a soul book"... "an enchantment which lasted for years and gradually crystallised into an ambition to write for myself"⁴³.

The last Rainbow Press publication, Dialogue Over a Ouija Board, a verse drama by Sylvia Plath, was published in September 1981. Leonard Baskin thought this book "the best of all the Rainbow books"⁴⁴ and Sebastian Carter, who designed and printed the book, called it "quite delicious"⁴⁵.

Baskin's drawing of a faun's head, which is opposite the title, looks very much as one might expect Ted's and Sylvia's Ouija spirit, Pan, to look. Pan, at different times, had led Sylvia to write her poem 'Lorelei', and Ted to write 'An Otter'⁴⁶.

The text of Dialogue Over a Ouija Board, according to Ted's note in Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems (where it is reproduced in full), was written by Sylvia some time in 1957-8 and uses "the actual 'spirit' text" of one of their Ouija sessions⁴⁷. At this particular session only Ted and Sylvia (and the 'spirits': Ted enclosed the word in inverted commas) were present. However, at a different Ouija session, Pan's words, as quoted by Ted in his Birthday Letters poem, 'Ouija', were actually the words of their friend Daniel Huws, who had got tired of waiting for spirits to move the glass on the Ouija board and had guided it himself. He comments that he had no idea what he was going to say, so, of course, he might have been controlled by Pan. Ted certainly believed that⁴⁸.

Over the ten years between 1971 and 1981, the Rainbow Press published sixteen beautiful books. By 1981, however, Olwyn no longer had the help of Keith Gossop or Richard Thomas. The use of part-time packers proved to be unsatisfactory and Olwyn did not have time to pack the books herself. So, in spite of the fact that for both Ted and Olwyn the press had been a happy experience, Olwyn decided reluctantly not to publish any more books. Looking back, she wrote, "The fine work had a good audience and many friends in collectors... It was a lovely thing to do. It never made much cash as the profits were ploughed back into further publications". But profit was not the motive behind the books: "they were never more than a help in that instance but spread the various poets' work around in their special ways"⁴⁹. Olwyn's biggest regret is that when Ted brought *Howls and Whispers* to her in 1997 and asked her to publish it, she decided not to take it on. It was published "very handsomely" by Baskin as a limited edition in 1998, at his Gehenna Press.

In 1979, the Rainbow Press books were included in a special exhibition of Ted's illustrated poems at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London⁵⁰. For this exhibition, Leonard Baskin supplied a drawing and Ted wrote the poem, 'In the Black Chapel'. Both of these were used on a special poster; and Baskin's drawing was also used on the front of the catalogue.

Although there were no more Rainbow Press publications after 1981, the Hughes family were still actively involved with small press publications. Olwyn had bought a small Albion press in the early 70s intending, she says, to play around with "design ideas... mainly of title pages". Had she come up with anything she would have "sent such roughs to a good printer as suggestions"⁵¹. When the printing turned out to be more complicated than she expected, she gave the press to Ted's son, Nicholas, who had learned printing and bookbinding at school and was exceptionally good at it.

In 1979, Nicholas set up The Morrighu Press. He bought more type and began to produce limited copies of Ted's poems as broadsheets and small booklets, printing them himself on hand-made paper, encasing some in a decorative hand-printed, Japanese-paper folders, and sewing others into hand-made paper covers. One of Nicholas's Morrighu Press publication, *Pan*, was illustrated by his sister, Frieda, with two scorpions. Many others contained drawings by Ted. The last few editions of booklets also included a colophon of a three-legged crow, drawn by Leonard Baskin from a design sketched out to him in a letter by Ted: "The main things are: Raven, 3 legs, a sun (it's Chinese sublimation of the 3 headed Morrighu who was a moon bird)"⁵².

Ted's drawing skills were excellent. A number of his drawings were on display at the V & A exhibition in 1979, but his only published drawings appear in the Rainbow Press book, *Earth Moon*, the Morrighu Press publications and, as a single drawing of a bull, on or in *Moortown Elegies* and the trade edition of *Moortown Diary*. In conversation with me, Ted once said that Leonard Baskin had dissuaded him from illustrating his own books, but he frequently drew on cards, postcards and inside the books which he gave to friends. Reg Lloyd's wife, Louise Macmillan, has a copy of *What is the Truth* (the

Faber edition of which was illustrated by Reg) which was extensively 'lionised' by Ted over a number of visits, with drawings of his birth-sign lion in various imaginative forms in many of the margins.

Nicholas's Morrighu Press publications sold for between £15 and £28, a small sum for the hours of painstaking work involved, the cost of materials, and the risk that not all of any edition would sell, although Olwyn notes that they knew their market and the broadsheets were simple to do. Sixteen Morrighu Press publications appeared between 1979 and 1983, after which, Nicholas received his BA degree in Zoology and, in 1984, moved to Alaska to take up a position as research assistant at the Alaska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit. Nicholas's Albion handpress was left behind in Devon and the Morrighu Press publications came to an end.

List of Rainbow Press publications.

List of Morrighu Press publications.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Weissbort, D. Ted Hughes and Translation, Richard Hollis, Five Leaves Publications, Nottingham, 2011. p.7.
2. Interview of Ted Hughes at the Adelaide Festival Book Week. Transcript: [./Adelaide3.htm](#).
3. Ann Skea notebooks and diaries, British Library Dep. 10515. Notebook 1992.
4. Myers, L. Crow Steered Bergrs Appeared, Proctor's Hall Press, Sewanee, Tennessee, USA, 2001. p.57.
5. Daniel Weissbort, e-mail to Ann Skea, 6 Oct. 2009.
6. Daniel Weissbort, unpublished memoir. In Ted Hughes and Translation (op.cit.) Weissbort dates the New Years Eve Party as 1962/3. The true date is uncertain.
7. The October date is specified in a letter from Hughes to Charles Tomlinson. Reid, C. (Ed.). Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. Summer/Autumn 1965. p.247.
8. Daniel Weissbort, e-mail to Ann Skea, 12 Oct. 2009.
9. Hughes, T. 'Introduction', MPT 1982, in Weissbort, D.(Ed) Ted Hughes: Selected Translations, Faber, 2006. p. 204.
10. Daniel Weissbort, unpublished memoir.
11. Hughes to Weissbort, 12 Feb. 1964 in Reid (Ed.), Letters of Ted Hughes, op.cit.,

pp.231-2.

12. Hughes to Daniel and Helga Huws, 26 September 1965 in Reid (Ed.), *Letters of Ted Hughes*, op.cit., p.249.

13. Peace News, founded in 1936 was, until 1961, the official paper of the Peace Pledge Union. Gandhi was an early contributor. Coincidentally, the editor of Peace News when MPT was being founded was Theodore Roszack, whose work, like Ted's, was published by Faber & Faber. There is no record of the two men ever meeting.

14. Hughes to Weissbort, Autumn 1969 in Reid (Ed.), op.cit., pp.297-8.

15. Sillitoe's 1970's date for this meeting is probably incorrect, since by 1970 work had already begun on the first of the Rainbow Press books. It is likely, too, that the dinner was not at Court Green but at Olwyn's London home. Olwyn moved from Court Green back to London in October 1965, although she still visited Devon frequently until about 1970.

16. Sillitoe, A. 'Ted Hughes: A Short Memoir' in Gammage, N (Ed.), *Epic Poise*, Faber 1999. p. 260.

17. Letter from Olwyn Hughes to Ann Skea, 18 Nov. 2009.

18. Letter from Olwyn Hughes to Ann Skea, 5 Dec. 2009.

19. Correspondence of Ted Hughes and K. Sagar. British Library. Add.78756. 27 April 1993.

20. Letter from Olwyn Hughes to Ann Skea, 7 Jan. 2012. Baskin's new colophon replaced the Press's original 'Moon-ark' emblem which has been attributed to William Blake and which first appeared at the end of Bryant's *New System of Mythology*, (1774-6). cf. Raine, K. *William Blake*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1970. pp. 13-14.

21. Richard Thomas and Olwyn divorced and Richard died in Crete in 1984. In a letter to Leonard Baskin, Ted wrote that "he died of bloodloss (he was a haemophilic) when some ulcer ruptured". Leonard Baskin/Ted Hughes correspondence. British Library Add mss. 83685. Thomas had Haemophilia B, a mild form of Haemophilia sometimes called the 'Christmas disease'.

22. Kukil, K (Ed.), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Faber, London, 2000. 'Appendix II 26[b] – 27[a]', pp. 613-4.

23. Carter, S. 'The Rainbow Press', *Parenthesis*, 12, November 2006. pp. 32-5.

24. Sangorski and Sutcliffe (est. 1901) are one of London's oldest and most prestigious bookbinding companies (See: <https://www.bookbinding.co.uk/History.htm>). They were

Olwyn's preferred bookbinders .

25. In July and August 1971, Hughes was with Peter Brook's company in Tehran. Smith, C.H. *Orghast at Persepolis*, Eyre Methuen, London 1972. p.154.

26. *Encounter*, (25:20-1) July 1965.

27. Sagar and Tabor, *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography 1946-1995*, Mansell, 1983, p. 58.

28. British Library Add. mss. 53784: *Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath: verse and prose*.

29. This book is an alchemical text written by the 17th century Hermeticist, Johann Christian Andreae.

30. Faas, E. *The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980. p.212.

31. Weissbort, D., *op.cit.*, pp.5-6.

32. Conversation with Ann Skea, 9 August 2011. *Diary/Notebook* 26.

33. *Moortown*, Faber, London, 1979. pp.71-92.

34. Kegan, P. (Ed.) *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, Faber. London, 2003.

35. Carter, *op.cit.*, p.33.

36. Carter, *op.cit.*, p.33.

37. Reid (Ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 201.

38. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, Penguin Classics, 1973.

39. Skea, A. *Ted Hughes: Difficulties of a Bridegroom*, Unpublished paper read at the Ted Hughes Conference at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 2010.

40. Jack Orchard died in February 1976, after which Ted and Carol sold much of their farm stock and let the fields for agistment.

41. Letter from Olwyn Hughes to Ann Skea, 18 November 2009.

42. Letter from Hughes to Gerald and Joan Hughes, 28 November 1977 in Reid (Ed.), *Op.cit.* p. 387.

43. Years later, Ted wrote of the influence of Williamson's book in a letter to Keith Sagar, 18 July 1998. Reid (Ed.) *Letters of Ted Hughes*, *Op.cit.* pp.724-5.

44. Letter from Olwyn Hughes to Ann Skea, 5 December 2009.

45. Carter, op.cit., p.34.

46. Kukil, K. (Ed.), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Faber, 2000. 'Friday July 1958', pp. 400-401; and Reid (Ed.), op.cit., p.721.

47. Hughes, T. (Ed.) *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, Faber, London, 1981. pp. 276-286. See also Ted's accounts of Ouija in letters to Lucas Myers (16 November 1956) and Keith Sagar (18 July 1998) in Reid (Ed.), op.cit., pp.87-8 and p.727.

48. Conversation with Ann Skea, 16 September 2010. Diary/Notebook 25.

49. Letter from Olwyn Hughes to Ann Skea, 18 November 2009.

50. Illustrations to Ted Hughes Poems, The Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, 12 September to 28 October 1979.

51. Letter from Olwyn Hughes to Ann Skea, 17 May 2011.

52. Correspondence of Ted Hughes and L.Baskin. British Library Add. 83684. Box.3. 19 July 1977.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options.

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes: An Introduction

© Ann Skea

The following article was first published in English In Australia, No. 74 (AATE), in December 1985, as a resource for teachers. The information is still relevant, but since 1985 much more of Hughes' poetry (as well as prose, plays and children's books) has been published and his work has been the subject of a number of books of analysis and interpretation. My own book, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, provides detailed analysis of many of the poems in *River*, *Remains of Elmet* and *Cave Birds*.

Ted Hughes died on October 28th, 1998, at the age of sixty-eight.

"Blood and Guts"

"Poetic voice of blood and guts" said a headline in one newspaper announcing the appointment of Ted Hughes as the new Poet Laureate last November [*The Guardian*, Dec. 20, 1984]. It was fairly typical of the surprise with which the media greeted this appointment because Ted Hughes, it seems, is for most people a difficult poet. His poetry is not easily understood like that of his popular predecessor, John Betjeman.

Also, he is still frequently described as a poet of blood and violence, which is not quite the expected style of the official composer of 'Royal Odes'. Hughes' friends, too, expressed surprise at the appointment, for, despite his recent OBE and Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, Hughes is far from the conventional public figure. He is a blunt Yorkshireman, as likely as any of his fellow Yorkshiremen to call a spade a 'bloody shovel'.

Although Hughes has lived in Devon for many years now, the significance of his Yorkshire origins for an understanding of his poetry is great. And one way of helping students (and teachers, too) to enjoy his work is to approach it through an understanding of the man himself-the experiences which have made him what he is and which have shaped the ideas which motivate him.

Hughes began writing poetry when he was about 15 and his first book of poems was published when he was 27. He was born in the small Yorkshire village of Mytholmroyd on August 17th, 1930, and his star sign is Leo. This star sign is of some significance to Hughes, whose first wife, Sylvia Plath, once described him as having pockets stuffed with horoscopes. Leo is symbolised in ancient astrological writings as Corvus, The Raven, a bird which is closely related to the crow. And Hughes often uses a crow as a symbol for the dark, subconscious side of human nature (see his volume of poems called Crow).

Yorkshire background

Yorkshire covers a large part of the North of England. In the western part, where Hughes was born, it is a rugged county of bare moors and mountains, often cold, rainy and windy in summer, and bleak and snowy in winter. This part of England was the home of the Brönte family and the setting for Emily Brönte's novel Wuthering Heights, and the people who are born there have certain characteristics which set them apart from other English people. They are a tough, hardy breed, descended from the Brigantes who were one of the earliest Celtic tribes of Britain. The area was once so inaccessible that it became an ideal place to hide, and it is no accident that the name 'Brigante' sounds very like the word 'brigand', which has come to mean bandit or robber in the English language.

In 1856, novelist and chronicler, Elizabeth Gaskell, wrote of Yorkshiremen:

Their accost is curt; their accent and tone of speech blunt and harsh. Something of this may, perhaps, be attributed to the freedom of mountain air and of isolated hill-side life, something be derived from their rough Norse ancestry. They have a quick perception of character, and a keen sense of humour.

The dwellers among them must be prepared for certain uncomplimentary, though most likely true, observations pithily expressed.

Strangers are traditionally "summered and wintered and summered again" before they are accepted. And Hughes, in a poem called 'For Billy Holt'(NSP.164) writes that Yorkshiremen have

A far veiled gaze of quietly
Homicidal appraisal.
A poverty
That cuts rock lumps for words.

The significance of all this is that Hughes is frequently accused of writing poetry which is unnecessarily rough and violent when he is simply being a typically blunt Yorkshireman, describing things as he sees them. For example, his Moortown poems (which began as a journal recording his farming experiences) are not at all like the traditional romantic view of nature for which English poets are famous. There is no trace in them of the kind of sentiments expressed in Elizabethan poet, Robert Herrick's, lines – "Fair daffodils we weep to see you haste away so soon", or Wordsworth's – "I wandered lonely as a cloud / that floats on high o'er vales and hills".

Yet, to hear Hughes read poems such as 'Ravens'(M.37; NSP.184) or 'Orf'(M.46), is to hear him express the tenderness he feels for the animals of which he writes, as well as his almost overwhelming awareness of the constant presence of birth and death in farming life. Hughes has lived close enough to nature to know, at first hand, the cruelty that exists beneath the beautiful surface. Characteristically, Hughes does not soften or hide these cruel facts but presents them in vivid, exact descriptions, which often arouse such negative emotions in his readers that they reject the poems altogether.

The questions which need to be asked about many of Hughes' poems are:

- is the poet showing only cruelty and violence?
- is this a realistic description of a situation?
- does the poet deliberately set out to arouse conflicting emotions in the reader and, if so, how does he do this? (Hughes, for example, often personifies the animals so that we identify with them more strongly).

Sensitivity and Understanding

It is important, also, to consider the degree of sensitivity and understanding, the degree of empathy with his subject, which is required for the poet to succeed in arousing strong emotions in his audience. The poem 'February 17th.'(M.39; NSP.186), is a good poem to examine in this respect, as the gory farming details of a stillbirth are contrasted with a gentle, loving description of the way the lamb should have been born:

He should have
Felt his way, tip-toe, his toes
Tucked up under his nose
For a safe landing.

The man's concern for the lamb's mother, too, is very evident in the poem, and his disgust at the bloody job he has to do.

Hughes, as a man and as a poet, frequently does not conform to the conventions which

society expects of him, and naturally this upsets people.

Having grown up in a working-class background, Hughes left High School with a scholarship to Cambridge University, where the literary set came mostly from the upper-class. He quickly established a reputation for being rather wild, and someone who was at Cambridge when Hughes was there commented that for a while there was some question as to whether it would be Hughes or Cambridge which would survive the experience.

Physically, Hughes is tall (over 6ft) and dark. He likes to wear black clothing, and he is often careless of his appearance. One critic has called him "Heathcliff". Another described him as "The Incredible Hulk of English literature". He is clever, strong minded and outspoken, and his interests cover a huge range of topics, including magic, mythology, world religions, language and music.

The Role of the Poet

Hughes has some very definite ideas about poetry and its functions, and about his own role as a poet. He has written and spoken a great deal about these ideas and, as might be expected, he deplores the sentimental, artificial approach to poetry, likening it to

The manner of a dear, sweet lady telling the vicar's
six-month old baby girl about the doings of her little
pussy cat.

Poetry, for him, is to do with the world of imagination, He calls it "a journey into the inner universe", and "an exploration of the genuine self". Poetry (he once wrote) is one way to

unlock the doors of those many mansions inside the head
and express something – perhaps not much, just something – of
the crush of information that presses in on us... Something
of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are...
Something of the inaudible music that moves us along in our
bodies from moment to moment like water in a river... (PIM.124)

Hughes believes that poetry is a magical and powerful way of reaching our feelings and emotions – our subconscious, natural energies. He believes that these energies have been repressed by an emphasis on the scientific approach to life and teaching. We are taught, he says, that emotions are dangerous, can distort our judgment, should not be relied upon when we have decisions to make, and that they have nothing to do with truth.

Nearly all schooling makes this kind of division: regarding the rational skills needed for maths and science, for example, as somehow superior to the skills needed for art and music.

Hughes sees this as wrong. He believes that it leads to inflexibility and dead-ends: to the sort of thinking that leads to war and destruction. Time and again, in his poetry,

Hughes celebrates the natural energies, shows how they exist in mankind, and makes the point that human wholeness depends on an acceptance of all aspects of our nature. In particular, he believes that we must recognise ourselves as part of the natural world, subject to the same forces of nature as all other living things.

The poem 'Egg Head' (HIR.35; NSP.10) presents this point of view by showing a man whose brain shuts out the beauty and the wonders of nature with "wide eyed deafness of prudence", "juggleries of benumbing", and "Braggart-browed complacency". The man tries to set himself apart from nature, but the irony of his egotism – his "staturing 'I am' " – is his "dewdrop frailty" in the face of nature's power. No amount of self-deception can overcome the reality of death – "the looming mouth of the earth" which waits for all living things. No amount of "sophistry" can finally resist "the flash of the sun, the bolt of the moon".

Creativity is necessary for survival and it requires both imagination and logic. Hughes sees it as the job of any kind of artist to help release our suppressed creative energies, and he believes that poetry is particularly effective for this purpose. Often, he sees himself as a shaman, a kind of tribal medicine man who makes symbolic journeys to the underworld of the subconscious to bring back lost souls and to cure sick people. The words, the symbols, the images and the musical rhythms of the poetry, are, for him, like the shaman's magic drum which helps him on his journey. It is these which stir our imagination, and the effect is a magical release of emotional energy.

Hughes and Plath

Hughes' own experiences with the powerful natural energies have been dramatic. In 1956, whilst at Cambridge University, he met the American poet, Sylvia Plath, and within four months of that meeting they were married. The intensity of their relationship was expressed in the poetry that each of them wrote at that time.

Ted for example wrote:

There is no better way to know us
Than as two wolves, come separately to a wood.
Now neither's able to sleep-even at a distance
Distracted by the soft competing pulse
Of the other;...
... Neither can make die
The painful burning of the coal in its heart
Till the other's body and the whole wood are its own.
Then it might sob contentment toward the moon.

...

'A Modest Proposal' (HIR.25).

It is characteristic of Hughes that this is not a conventional, romantic love poem.

Similarly, in a poem of Sylvia's called, 'The Queen's Complaint' (SPCP.28), we get some idea of the impact which Ted made on her:

In the ruck and quibble of courtfolk
This giant hulked, I tell you, on her scene
With hands like derricks,
Looks fierce and black like rooks;
Why, all the windows broke when he stalked in.

And she wrote to her mother:

I have never known anything like it. For the first time in my life I can use all of my knowing and laughing and force and writing up to the hilt all the time, everything ... I feel a growing strength. I do not merely idolise him, I see right into the core of him.(LH. April 19, 1956)

With two such intense, ambitious and unusual people, the marriage can hardly have been dull. For seven years Ted and Sylvia lived together, apparently quite happily if Sylvia's letters to her mother can be believed. Then, just after the birth of their second child, Nicholas, things went badly wrong. Ted fell in love with another woman and, by mutual agreement, he and Sylvia parted and began divorce proceedings.

Sylvia and the two children lived on in their house in Devon for a while, then they moved to a flat in London. It was the worst winter England had experienced for many years. Sylvia, who had always suffered painful sinus problems, was ill, but she was writing furiously and producing at least one good poem a day – sometimes two or three. Physically and emotionally she was at the end of her tether and she sought psychiatric help. In February 1963, she committed suicide by gassing herself.

No-one will ever know the full story. Sylvia had attempted suicide at least once before, when she was 18. On that occasion she had been found by a fortunate accident and she subsequently spent some time in a psychiatric hospital being treated for depression. Much of what she experienced then appears in her novel, *The Bell Jar*, which was written and published shortly before her death.

In spite of the fact that Sylvia seemed to be fully recovered by the time she met Ted Hughes, some critics have suggested that there is evidence in her letters, journals and poetry, particularly in the period just before her death, of the sort of personality which is associated with manic-depressive disorder.

As might be expected, Sylvia's death affected Hughes profoundly. Shortly after her death, he wrote the anguished poem 'The Howling of Wolves'(W.178; NSP.84) (which takes its title from William Blake's proverb - The howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man. Hughes wrote one other poem at this time, 'The Song of the Rat'(W.162; NSP.76), then nothing for three years.

Because the poetry of both these people expresses, as Hughes puts it, their "inner life", it is often possible to look at their work and know what their feelings were at the time a

particular poem was written. This is dramatically illustrated by two poem which may well to be related to incidents concerned with their marriage breakdown. Sylvia apparently heard about the 'other woman' through a phone call. Her poem 'Words, heard by accident, over the phone'(SPCP.202) seems to describe this event and her feelings.

Hughes' poem, 'Do not Pick up the Telephone'(NSP.215), may also refer to the same period, although it was not published until 1980 (in Ploughshares(6:82-7)). It is a powerful poem which sounds, when Hughes reads it himself, like an incantatory curse. It certainly shows how Hughes feels about the telephone. Strangely, teenage students often identify strongly with the sentiments expressed in the poem, although presumably for quite different reasons to Hughes. Because of this, it is a good poem with which to begin a discussion of some of the characteristics of Hughes' poetry, and to illustrate the way in which the poet's emotions, energy and intellect, as well as his experiences, are brought together to shape his work.

Note: Audio tapes on which Ted Hughes reads some of the poems mentioned in this article are:

Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas, The Critical Forum Series, Norwich Tapes, 1978

Ted Hughes and Paul Muldoon, Faber Poetry Cassette (ISBN 0 571 13080 9)

Abbreviations and Bibliography:

HIR Hughes, T. The Hawk in the Rain, London, Faber, 1968

M Hughes, T. Moortown, London, Faber, 1979

NSP Hughes, T. New Selected Poems 1957-1994, London, Faber, 1995

PIM Hughes, T. Poetry in the Making, London, Faber, 1969

SPCP Hughes, T.(Ed.) Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, London, Faber, 1981

W Hughes, T. Wodwo, London, Faber, 1971

LH Plath, A.(Ed.) Sylvia Plath: Letters Home, N.Y., Harper and Row, 1975

© Ann Skea. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalThe abandoned script of King Lear; Pike and Angels; and Orghast: Notes on a BBC Radio 3 interview with Ted Hughes.

© Ann Skea
King Lear

In a BBC Radio 3 interview with Clive Wilmer on 5 April 1992, Hughes was asked about the origins of his book *Shakespeare and The Goddess of Complete Being*. He began by saying that one of the springs of the book was a film script he began to write in the late 60s and early 70s when Peter Brook asked him to write a scenario for Shakespeare's *King Lear*. He was reluctant to do this because, to him, it was a sacred text. For two to three months he "laboured away trying to simplify it". But the first thing that he realized was that every word was important – that if you "take out one little nut here... a wing falls off somewhere or other – and a tail begins to come loose – the whole thing is so intimately integrated".

Then one night he had a dream. There was a tremendous banging on his back door at Court Green and when he opened it "there was Shakespeare himself, in all his Elizabethan gear, like that portrait of Gloriana – jewels, ruffs, and the rest of it" and absolutely furious with him for "tinkering with *King Lear*". He came in, "boiling with rage". Then, in the enormous roof space in the top of the house he put on a performance of *King Lear*, using his own text, "as it should be put on, according to him". It was "immense, filling the whole sky". This extraordinary dream, Hughes says, "was the most tremendous thing" and it opened a way into "the whole mythical background of the play". The next morning, he sat down and wrote bits of it that he could remember but he really took the dream to mean that he "had to stop tinkering with *King Lear*". So, "reluctantly – perhaps wrongly", he did.

Pike and Angels

Asked about his use of myth in his poems, Hughes said that even in his first books he could trace odd leading images directly back to certain mythical things that interested him. 'Hawk Roosting', for example, was "a straight monologue for a notion of the Egyptian hawk Horus – the immortal hawk who is the Eye of the Sun; who flies through all hawks and or who absorbs all hawks". He was, he says, "trying to raise the creatures that I encountered in my boyhood in South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire". He was "trying to raise them into some sort of mythic frieze" or mural. Pike, for instance: "they were to be angels, hanging in the aura of the Creator – they were just hanging there in a... great ball of light..., pulsing away there, very still". They were still, he says, "because they were originally angels". He went on to say that he was trying to raise his pike to the "kind of intensity and generality" exhibited by Blake's tiger. That was his ideal, and his efforts, he said, are apparent in the original drafts of the poem. In the end, however, he "just cut them out and then left [himself] with the old South Yorkshire fish". However, that had been the original purpose and motivation behind the poem itself, as it was, also, with the Hawk.

Orghast

Orghast, said Hughes, was a project he undertook with Peter Brook in preparation for a

performance at the Shiraz Festival in Persia. Peter's international group of actors all spoke different languages and Peter assumed that the audience in Persia would be international or would be Iranian. The whole experiment was to search for a kind of acting which would not have "the divisiveness of being characterised by a single culture or a single language" but would be common to all human beings. This meant that actions had to be generalized, not necessarily "primitive" but on a "thoughtful or mythical level".

Hoping to force the actors back into resources behind verbal expressiveness – "back into some sort of musical or other kind of expressiveness" – Hughes began with no language at all – "just using bird cries". Then, he wrote a scene about the Vulture visiting Prometheus on his crag. He wanted to write a text of some kind, so that he could "organise the music of it", so he invented about half a dozen words. And "automatically, because you don't want to just invent meaningless sounds", he made each syllable represent what he considered to be the central ideas of the drama. He and the actors invented quite a large vocabulary. Then, "automatically", he began to introduce a grammar - cases, tenses – and "the whole thing just automatically turned into a language,... it just automatically evolved in that way, on the pattern, I suppose, of Latin". As it became a language, however, the actors began to use it as a language in the scenes and it began to work less and less well. Instead of "driving them right back into the absolute last-ditch effort to express something—or–other that couldn't be expressed in words, they were just talking". It became "like Chekov" but what Hughes and Peter wanted was something more like "the first Parliament of the apes". So, Hughes broke it down again, wrote a new language and didn't tell the actors what the words meant. Then it began to work again.

Hughes saw the whole thing as a very interesting double experiment. Firstly, he discovered how easy and "how natural it is to make a language". Then, he learned how, "as the language became full of verbal meanings, it ceased to draw on any of the expressive resources of the people using it": how people "simply used it as a code, putting less and less and less expressiveness into it; hiding behind it more and more". In order to get the actors to "reveal themselves again" he had needed to destroy that language and "give them, again, a sequence of cries which didn't have verbal meaning... And then, once again, they were forced back onto other resources, and tremendous, exciting, strange musical things could happen again".

Asked if this had influenced his verse, Hughes commented that it had enormously strengthened his sense of the "mosaic quality of verse" and of the way that verse operates. When language begins to operate like that, he said, "it is somehow pitched beyond the superficial syntactical meaning".

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options.](#)

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalDifficulties of a Bridegroom by Ted Hughes

Faber, London, 1995.

Review by Ann Skea

The nine stories in this small book are strange and unusual. They deal with ghosts, angels, shape-shifting, and weird, dream-like states in which unexpected and sometimes terrifying events occur. The people in them move between the normal world of ordered everyday experience and the imaginative, chaotic world of the subconscious.

Hughes is especially good at drawing us into the mind of his characters so that we experience everything through their thoughts and feelings. So, in one story, we share the Beckett-like world of a man isolated in snow, with no memory of how he got there and with only an old, wooden chair to confirm the existence of some other, human, world. To wall out nature's chaos, this man tries to deal only with 'truth' and 'facts', but the seductive attraction of chaos lures him into an irrational and deadly game.

In other stories, wild, animal energies disturb the equanimity of the human mind and create an hallucinatory half-world in which reality and identity become uncertain. Sunstruck in the heat of a harvest meadow, a man changes places with a hare that is trapped in the dwindling square of corn. In a rain-sodden landscape another man experiences the menacing power of a strange horse which threatens and follows him.

All the stories, three of which are previously unpublished, are intense, imaginative explorations of our place in the world of nature. They describe human negotiations with energies (caged or unrestrained) which are part of us, just as we are part of them, so that we ignore them at our peril.

That this is the theme of the stories is not immediately apparent, because each has its own compact and self-contained fascination. But, in his Foreword, Hughes says that they hang together in his own mind "as an accompaniment" to his poetry, and he refers us to the alchemical origins of his title as explanation.

This will confuse those who know nothing about alchemy, even if they have read Hughes' poetry. But the arduous procedures of alchemy have the same pattern as the shamanic journey, and have a similar spiritual purpose. The alchemist, like the shaman, must 'die' to the material world and enter the dangerous, often hellish, underworld in order to bring back some healing energies to our world. Hughes, as alchemist/shaman, uses our imaginative powers to take us with him on this journey.

In his introductory note to this book, Hughes says that he first came across the phrase, 'difficulties of a bridegroom', in about 1962 and that this became the working title of everything he wrote "for the next few years". What he does not say (and perhaps these stories and much of his other work would be more widely understood if he did) is that at this time he was working on a verse-drama based on the seventeenth-century hermetic text, *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, by Johann Valentin Andreae.

Hughes calls Andreae's work a "crucial seminal work... a tribal dream", and its influence on him was profound. Several poems grew from the verse-drama he was writing, but it remained unfinished. From it, however, came the Crow voice and, eventually, Crow himself. More importantly, the alchemical quest, the spiritual journey in search of enlightenment and wholeness, became the focus and guide for his creative work from then on.

These stories, then, which span some forty years of Hughes' creative life and contain many of his personal experiences, can be seen as part of the journey which Hughes makes as an alchemist/poet/bridegroom whose subject (and prospective bride) is Nature.

'The Deadfall', which Hughes chose as "the natural overture to the sequence", describes in vivid detail 'the call' which traditionally begins the journey to the spirit world. It tells of events on a hunting expedition Hughes made with his older brother, and, although it is not necessary to read the poems, there are clear links with 'Two', 'Hardcastle Crag', and 'The Ancient Briton Lay Under His Rock' (Remains of Elmet, 1979), and with a more recent poem, 'Anniversary' (New Selected Poems, 1995). Most intriguing, in this story, is the resemblance between the carved, bone fox found by the boy and the Japanese netsuke pictured on Hughes' book Wolfwatching (1989). How much of this story is fact, how much fiction, is impossible to tell.

'The Wound', takes us into a demon-filled underworld. So, too, does 'The Head'. But it is in this final story that the hunter/journeyer/shaman achieves a reconciliation, a marriage of sorts, with nature.

Certainly, without some knowledge of Hughes' purpose and of the great range of world mythologies from which he draws his images, there is blood and violence enough to confirm Hughes' critics in their negative views. But the beauty is there too. And the poetic power of Hughes' story-telling voice carries you through strange and magical events, so that most readers will find the stories absorbing and their imaginations will have been stirred even if, finally, some of the tales leave them puzzled

For Hughes, as for Blake, imagination is the key to regeneration and re-integration of the energies. It is, as he once wrote, one way "to unlock the doors of all those mansions inside the head" and to "really possess our own experience". In this way, he believes, we can learn to live in harmony with nature.

© Ann Skea, 2001. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes, Gaudete, Cave Birds, and the 1975 Ilkley

Literature Festival.

In memory of Keith Sagar, who died suddenly and unexpectedly from a heart attack on Tuesday 15th October 2013.

Keith was to have given this talk at the Ilkely Literature Festival on Saturday 20th. My thanks to Melissa Sagar for permission to publish it here.

© Estate of Keith Sagar.

In 1967 Philip Larkin wrote a poem called 'Annus Mirabilis', which begins:

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me) –
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP.

A strangely puritanical culture had somehow survived the war, and lasted until the advent of the 'permissive society' of the sixties (which was rather late for me too). One particularly sensational manifestation of it was the spate of cases in the late fifties where ministers were exposed as having secret covens of their female parishioners, where both witchcraft and venery were practiced. The News of the World made hay.

Ted Hughes had a different interest in them. He was fascinated by the psychology of the ministers, the women, and their husbands, and in 1964 began to sketch out a film-script (an early version of *Gaudete*, which still shows some of the characteristics of a film script). He soon dropped the venture, but returned to it in 1971. Hughes said that for a while he had thought of *Gaudete* as 'just being the story of English Maytime', in which 'all the forms of natural life', including 'the actual bodies of the people' [Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (1980), p.215], are emissaries from the underworld, the world of natural energies underneath the concrete and pebble-dash, energies which erupt at last, bringing chaos.

Gaudete is the story of Nicholas Lumb, an Anglican minister in a Devon village, who is abducted by spirits and taken to the underworld, where he is asked to heal a beautiful, half-animal woman, who seems to be dying. (It later transpires that she is the goddess, Nature herself, so that saving her would also mean saving a blighted world.) But Lumb is helpless, out of his depth. 'He is not a doctor. He can only pray.'

Meanwhile, so that Lumb will not be missed in his parish, a changeling is sent to replace him during his sojourn in the underworld. Hughes' original idea was that half the story would be about Lumb's trials in the underworld, and half about the disastrous impact of a rampant nature spirit in his village. In the event he decided to focus the narrative on the changeling, and handle Lumb's confused experiences not with any sequential narrative at all, but with his phantasmagoric memories, and prayers to the goddess, conveyed in an epilogue of 44 short poems, after his return to this world. These poems he called *Lumb's Remains*.

Lumb returns to the upper world much changed, not to his parish, but as a hermit in the

West of Ireland. Now, apparently, like the Ancient Mariner, a slightly crazy outcast, he is able not only to write remarkable poems, but to call an otter out of the lough, and inspire three young girls with a sense of miracle. The girls rush to tell their priest, who had been seeking inspiration from the anchorite St. Ignatius, who had written 'We must make ourselves indifferent to all created things'. To Hughes indifference to created things is spiritual death, and a manifestation of sacrilegious hubris. This world of teeming miracles, of growth and decay, of birth and death, is not good enough for man, who demands immortality. The spark passes from the girls to the priest. He is granted a sudden glimpse of the 'untouched joy' which Lumb has let in again to a once 'horrible world' [Gaudete, Faber (1977), p.194].

READING: 'And as he spoke...'. [Gaudete, p.175.]

It is an instantaneous, vicarious, and wholly joyful replay of what has slowly and painfully happened to Lumb himself during his sojourn in the underworld, whence he emerges as a shaman. The experience is parallel, in Hughes' words, to that of the ancient mariner's 'revelation of the divine glory of the total creation' which 'renews his spiritual being'.

Some time in 1973–4, Hughes had come across A. K. Ramanujan's book, *Speaking of Siva*, and the *vacanas* of the Siva-worshipping mystics of Southern India. Although they are part of the mystical process of becoming one with a god or with a divine Creative Source, the *vacanas* were written in a very naked, direct, personal and colloquial style, which Hughes immediately began to imitate, gradually making it his own. The *Gaudete* epilogue poems are virtually Hughes' *vacanas*:

The poems I wrote in and around that time, as *vacanas* (an Indian form of prayer poem, specifically Tamil, I think). Again I wrote them as an attempt to reach a more direct, flexible, simpler expression of things that would be compromised by a more studied or 'literary' form. Each one jumps out of its own impulse, then shapes itself, extempore fashion, as it goes along – as you shape your remarks when you feel you have to get something over to somebody in a quarrel, or when you're trying to explain why you did something incomprehensible, or when you're pleading with somebody to do something. [Letters of Ted Hughes, (ed.) Reid, C., Faber (2007), pp.634-5.]

Hughes' *vacanas* are obviously, in one sense, simpler than his earlier poems, but also more concentrated, making considerable demands on the reader. Like the originals, they span, or rather concentrate, a vast range of feeling. It is the perfect form for holding the precarious balance of 'terror and exultation' which was Hughes' response to the goddess in the early seventies.

READING: 'The coffin, spurred by its screws...'. [Gaudete, p.189.]

The title, *Gaudete*, (meaning 'rejoice' in Latin) came by chance. Hughes heard a remarkable sound from his daughter's room, and rushed to ask her what it was. It was the Steeleye Span version of 'Gaudete' from the *Piae Cantiones* of 1582, which the previous Christmas, 1973, had reached number 14 in the UK charts. The singer was

Maddy Prior, whom Hughes described as 'the most thrilling singer I ever heard'. In May 1976 he wrote to his publisher:

Yes, the title has exercised me, from the point of view of the customer in the shop who doesn't want to feel even very slightly a fool. Even when you have a pronunciation, there's still something odd about it. But it's stuck, as far as I'm concerned. The subtitle has always been 'An English Idyll' – but the irony of that seemed a bit precious. The title did make fools of American customers and critics, who pronounced and even spelled it Gaudette, with a double t.

In the spring of 1977 Ted sent me an advance copy of *Gaudete* (inscribed 'The head is older than the book'). I wanted to share my excitement, so I organized free weekly meetings at my home for friends and adult students I knew to be interested in Hughes. All that summer several of us went through the book page by page. My chapter on *Gaudete* in the second edition of *The Art of Ted Hughes* grew out of those meetings. Not only was I bowled over by the book in its own terms, it also had the dramatic and immediate effect of fertilizing my own imagination (an effect Ted's poems had on many others, including Seamus Heaney and Simon Armitage). I wrote more and much better poems in 1977 than any other year. I sent the best of my poems to Ted, and his response was so encouraging that I asked him if he would expand his comments a little to form an introduction to my poems in a series called 'Proem Pamphlets' being published by the Yorkshire Arts Association – another of Michael Dawson's innovations. The idea was that in each a selection of a new poet's work would be introduced by an established poet. To my delight and surprise, Ted came up with an essay on the virtues of simplicity in poetry. Surprise, because, as we shall see later, I had long been nagging Ted that some of his poems were too obscure. At the end of the essay he wrote:

Keith Sagar's verse is manifestly plain. when I first met these pieces, I could not put my finger on just what it is in them that rings so true, and that kept bringing me back to look at them again, and that gave me such a definite pleasure when I did. I could recognise in them, everywhere, his special brand of humour (serious) and the way it blends into the fascinated attention ? a very special quality in itself that he brings to whatever interests him. I could also sense and enjoy his very original and private relationship to the natural world. I felt there was a real person in these poems, to whom things happened in a real way, and interestingly. I like his attitude of affectionate, unsentimental, workmanlike practicality towards small things ? very like his use of language in the poems. And I appreciated his quiet skill the deft and solid simplicity of his patterns. Again and again, with the baldest economy, he seemed to me to get it just right.

You can imagine how encouraging that was to someone hardly any of whose poems had previously been published. In spite of that weighty recommendation, I had to wait until 2004 to get my one and only book of poems, *Mola*, published. Ted's essay is reprinted in *Poet and Critic* [Faber (2012)] (which includes all 147 of Ted's letters to me).

During his stay in Massachusetts in 1957–8, Hughes had met and befriended the great American artist, sculptor, engraver and publisher, Leonard Baskin. Baskin was obsessed by crows and raptors. Hughes shared this interest. He had already written 'The Hawk in the Rain', and probably wrote 'Hawk Roosting' during his American sojourn.

After the death of Sylvia Plath in 1963, Baskin sent Ted some crow drawings, with the suggestion that he write some poems to accompany them. The Baskin drawings from 1964 show that Baskin at that time was depicting crows not as creatures from the natural world, but, like Goya's owls, as nightmare emanations from the human mind. Like his thought-fox and most of his other animals, Hughes' crow is simultaneously a real crow, a crow as depicted in world folklore, and a part of himself – the dark side.

In 1964 Hughes wrote *Eat Crow*, in which one of the characters says:

The crow is composed of terrible black voice. ... He looks this way and that. The forms of the stones, the fractures of heavenly accident, the resolute quality of light, hold the crow anaesthetized, every hour in more skilled patience, resigned to the superior stamina of the empty horizon, limber and watchful.

Hughes embarked on a huge project in which his crow character would be the protagonist of an 'epic folk-tale' (in prose, but studded with hundreds of poems, most of them the harsh songs of the crow). Hughes' mythic imagination recognized the manifold mythic and folkloristic potentialities of this character, as trickster, quest hero, and embodiment of almost all the themes which were most urgent to him at that time.

In the first two-thirds of the story, Crow makes almost all the mistakes man has ever made, particularly in his relationship with the female, the female, that is, in all its manifestations – mother, bride, and Nature herself. Then, with the guidance of an Eskimo shaman, he begins to learn. Towards the end, Crow needs to cross a river to get to the Happy Land on the other side. But an Ogress (the ugly, threatening face he has himself projected onto the female) bars his way, and insists that he carry her across. His answers to the seven dilemma questions she asks him as he stumbles across recapitulate the whole history of his mistaken dealings with the female. As Hughes described it in 1970, the year of the publication of *Crow*:

His answers move from one pole of total disaster in the relationship between him and the female to the opposite pole of totally successful, blissful union. And meanwhile, this Ogress on his back turns into a beauty, before she escapes into the oak forest on the other side of the river. And there are many more episodes in this happy land until the Ogress eventually becomes his bride.

But this happy ending, this resolution of most of the dilemmas, was never written. At the very point where Crow meets the Eskimo shaman, and his real progress was to have begun, Hughes was silenced by another personal tragedy, in March 1969, a tragedy almost as deep as the suicide of his wife Sylvia Plath six years earlier. Though Hughes believed in 'upbeat' endings in his works for children, he could not write for adults what

he had not validated in his own life.

Thus Crow was published as only a selection of the poems from the first two-thirds of the story, and, since that story was then unknown, it was widely read as totally nihilistic. As he gradually recovered in the early seventies, Hughes tried to take up the Crow story again, but could never get back onto that imaginative plane. But the extent to which Cave Birds is also 'continued Crow' is obvious in such poems as 'Bride and Groom', where Crow, now become fully human, achieves at last 'totally successful, blissful union' with the female (his former victim and demonized Ogress).

READING: 'Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days'. [Ted Hughes: Collected Poems, (ed.) Keegan, P. Faber (2003,) p.437-8, Gaudete, p.189.]

In 1974 Leonard Baskin sent Hughes a set of nine bird drawings to see if he would be interested in writing poems to accompany them. Hughes saw these drawings as an opportunity for what he called 'continued Crow', a bird-drama in which Crow would be brought to trial for his crimes (of which he is totally ignorant) against the female. Crow himself became a cockerel, a traditional image for pride of life, cocksureness. Baskin's 'Hercules-in-the-Underworld Bird', a raptor with huge multiple spurs, became the Summoner; a vulturess the interrogator; a bloated bird, all buttocks, became the Judge; the Plaintiff, an amalgam of all Crow's victims, was a vast owl, whose every feather Hughes saw as a wound, and also as a mouth accusing Crow. A dense black raven (which Baskin had called a 'Raven of Ravens') became his executioner. Finally Crow was resurrected as Baskin's 'Ghostly Falcon'.

Thus Hughes, not suspecting that there might be more drawings to come, wrote what he thought of as a complete cycle. But when Baskin read these poems, he was inspired to produce another ten drawings (the ten which appeared in the Scolar Press edition of Cave Birds to coincide with the 1975 Ilkley festival). These were drawings of a very high order, but they obliged Hughes to complicate his drama by inventing many intermediate stages. It was complicated further by incorporating a shadow-theme – the death and resurrection of Socrates – and a great deal of imagery drawn from Alchemy.

Most people think of alchemy as the attempt to transmute base metals into gold. But that was a cul-de-sac. Alchemy was a combination of philosophy and what later became chemistry. It arose from the theory that all things decayed and died only because they were impure. If the impurities could be removed, by filtration, heat, and many more esoteric methods, decay and death could be defeated. Alchemists were highly secretive. They expressed their knowledge in a symbolic jargon which could be understood only by initiates.

Hughes was extremely knowledgeable, not only in areas of general knowledge and areas an educated poetry-lover might be expected to frequent, but also in folklore and mythology, and such esoteric areas as Alchemy, Tarot, Rosicrucianism, Shamanism,

Cabbala, Sufism and Astrology. In his determination to load every rift with ore, he had drawn on all of these in both the plot and the symbolism of his bird drama. He had an altogether unrealistic notion of what level of knowledge he could assume in his readership. What Hughes regarded as his essential shared mythos with his readers included much more than a thorough knowledge of English flora and fauna. It included the whole of classical, Celtic and Nordic mythologies, 'the whole tradition [in his own words] of Hermetic Magic (which is a good part of Jewish Mystical philosophy, not to speak of the mystical philosophy of the Renaissance), the whole historical exploration into spirit life at every level of consciousness, the whole deposit of earlier and other religion, myth, vision, traditional wisdom and story in folk belief, on which Yeats based all his work'.

When Ted sent me the first draft of 'The Snake in the Oak', the second of his two essays on Coleridge, in 1993, he asked me to provide a list of the places where I thought clarifying notes were needed: 'My sense of what is necessary, in that line, is defective', he wrote. He was shocked that I did not know what he meant by the 'Keeper of the Threshold'. He regarded all such stories from myth and folklore as 'standard features' which he could take for granted as common ground with his readers. He was surprised to find that his copy-editor did not know what Samadhi were. Neither did I. Neither, I was sure, did the vast majority of his potential readers. Given the intractable problems of communication he had bewailed in the first Coleridge essay, it was incomprehensible to me that in the second he should have indulged in so many esoteric and exclusive references. 'The goblins of the sangsara on a Tibetan tanka', for example, have never been part of any Western mythos. In 1984 Hughes had read Phoenix, Lawrence's posthumous prose, and described it as 'straight oxygen'. The pity of it, it seemed to me, was that Hughes was perfectly capable of writing prose of similarly energizing directness and lucidity.

My correspondence with Hughes over thirty years is peppered with my complaints about the unintelligibility of some of his poems, not only to the general reader, but even to professional critics.

Hughes was well aware of how dense the bird-drama had now become. In compensation, he added twelve poems outside the bird drama. He wrote to me that parallel to the alchemical cave drama 'goes a more human progress of correspondences, which are free & loose, contrast to the studied formality of the bird-pieces'. But Baskin later produced eight more drawings to go with the new poems. Hughes thought these drawings were inferior to the earlier ones, and did not really want bird drawings for poems which stood outside the bird drama, but did not want to upset Baskin by excluding them. The trade edition was published by Faber in 1978. Hughes later came to feel that working in harness with artists and photographers, even when they were as congenial as Fay Godwin and Leonard Baskin, was like running in a three-legged race, and persuaded Faber to publish Three Books, in which he produced new versions of Cave Birds, Remains of Elmet and River, without those constraints.

1974–5 was possibly the most productive year of Hughes' entire poetic career. He wrote many of the farming poems published in Moortown, and most of both *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete*.

Michael Dawson, the director of the Yorkshire Arts Association and the Ilkley Literature Festival, decided to make Hughes the main theme of the 1975 festival, the second. I don't know how Michael knew that Hughes had just completed *Gaudete* and *Cave Birds*, or that the Cambridge University Press was about to publish my book, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, the first full-length critical study of Hughes. Perhaps he will tell us in his talk tomorrow. Anyway, he contacted me, and invited me to direct an extra-mural course on Hughes during the festival. He then accepted my offer to mount the first Ted Hughes exhibition as part of the festival.

Penguin had just published *Worlds*, an anthology of poems by seven contemporary poets, each selection accompanied by photographs of that poet's 'world'. The section on Ted featured thirteen photographs of the Calder Valley by Fay Godwin. I invited Fay to submit some of her photographs for the exhibition. To my delight she sent me thirty large prints. I was just beginning to take these down on the Sunday morning after the end of the festival, when Ted came in to look at them. He was most impressed. They stimulated him to take up a vague idea he had briefly discussed with Fay in 1970, and the result was *Remains of Elmet*. Fay gave me some of the prints, and I bought others from her.

Long after the publication of *Remains of Elmet*, I went for a walk at Hardcastle Crag, near Hebden Bridge. I was about to go down a steep, narrow path towards Gibson's Mill when I saw someone just beginning to ascend it, someone burdened with photographic equipment, and waited.

When she drew level I saw it was Fay. I asked if she was planning to publish something else on that area, but she said, no. Since she had discovered it, through Ted, she couldn't keep away, it was so photogenic.

Michael Dawson arranged for the publication of a huge and magnificent edition of *Cave Birds* by the Scolar Press in Ilkley. The edition (limited to 125 copies) consisted of ten of the poems, each accompanied by a facsimile of a draft of that poem and a large print of the Baskin drawing. He persuaded Hughes to give a reading, which he shared with James Kirkup and Vernon Scannell, on the final evening. But the highlight of the Festival was the previous evening, a performance arranged with the BBC, when four actors, Harvey Hall, Frances Horowitz, Peter Marinker and Gary Watson, directed by George MacBeth, gave a semi-dramatized reading of the latest version of *Cave Birds*, linked by a brief recorded commentary by Hughes, and of Lumb's *Remains*, a selection of poems from the Epilogue of *Gaudete*, read by Ted himself.

The reading of *Cave Birds* was accompanied by Baskin's drawings projected on a screen. During the reading of 'His Legs Ran About' a strange caterwauling gradually

swelled near the back of the auditorium, and I glimpsed out of the corner of my eye some people helping a woman out. I had dinner with Ted and Leonard the next evening, but I didn't mention the incident, because I didn't discover until a few days later that the woman had been one of my own adult students, to whom I had recommended the reading. She told me that the involuntary howling had come upon her gradually, and that it was more the Baskin drawing than the poem which had finally released it. She was able to laugh about it afterwards.

The next time I saw Ted I told him about it. He smiled and said 'We poets have to be tough'. This incident greatly increased the press coverage of the event.

This reading was repeated in London on 26 May, where it was recorded by the BBC, to be broadcast on 23 June on radio 3.

In his letter accompanying the Ilkley version of Cave Birds, Hughes had said that parallel to the alchemical bird drama 'goes a more human progress of correspondences, which are free & loose, contrast to the studied formality of the bird-pieces'.

Two years later Hughes sent me a much-revised version of Cave Birds which he had prepared for publication. I was appalled to find that five of my favourite poems from this 'more human progress', 'After the first fright', 'She seemed so considerate', 'Something was happening', 'Only a little sleep' and 'A Loyal Mother', had gone, thus tipping the whole work towards even greater artificiality. I wrote to him in dismay. He replied (10 June 1977):

Thank you for your remarks about Cave Birds, because they made me dig out those pieces I'd deleted, and so it comes about that I rediscover their rough virtues, so much better than what I tried to replace them with, as you so rightly complain, and I think probably better than the main sequence, certainly better than many of them. In fact now I look at them I realise they were the beginning of an attempt to open myself in a different direction; a very necessary direction for me, the only real direction, and I'm aghast at the time and density of folly that has passed since I lost sight of it. All five of these poems were restored in the published version.

I like to think that this, my first presumptuous intervention, not only led to a better Cave Birds, but helped Hughes to move forward in a 'necessary direction'. Two years later Hughes wrote to Gifford and Roberts:

After the First Fright is crude – at one point I replaced it – but I put it back. Keith Sagar urged me not to drop it, and he's right, it has a kind of intactness – it states its case in a way I haven't been able to improve. Gifford, T. and Roberts, N. Ted Hughes: A Critical Study, Faber (1981), p.259.

It seemed to me that the two halves of the Ilkley reading – Cave Birds followed by Lumb's Remains, represented two extremes of Hughes' work to date, Cave Birds being

at the extreme of artifice, complexity and obscurity (which undoubtedly delivered its own riches); and Lumb's Remains being at the extreme of stripped-down nakedness, directness and artlessness. I felt very strongly that the second was the direction in which Hughes should be going.

Finally, an amusing footnote. Shortly after meeting Ted, Sylvia wrote to her mother:

Ted is the first man who really has a love of food...[He] just lay groaning by the hearth after the meal with utter delight, like a huge Goliath. [Sylvia Plath: Letters Home, (ed.)Plath, A., Faber (1978), p.244]

Having lived for my first 25 years in Bradford, I was familiar with the Box Tree Restaurant in Ilkley, which of course is still going strong. I invited Ted and Carol to have dinner with me there after Ted's reading on the Saturday evening. They accepted, and brought with them Leonard and Lisa Baskin, and David and Tina Pease (David being the director of the Arvon Foundation, with which Ted was heavily involved).

All four of the men ordered t-bone steaks. They were the largest I had ever seen. Only Ted managed to finish his. The rest of us managed about half. Ted turned to Leonard: 'Are you not going to eat that, Leonard?' 'No'. 'Pass it over'. Ted devoured it, then did the same with David's leavings and mine. I was reminded of a favourite saying of Ted's: 'The lady's leavings are the dog's dainties'.

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options.

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and Shamanism

by Michael Baldwin.

©Michael Baldwin

Shamanism is not my word for Ted's belief system, nor – in my hearing – was it ever Ted's. It was used as a generic description of Ted's muse by A. Alvarez in several broadcasts subsequent to Ted's death. Alvarez and Hughes were friends until 1963. Since then, and certainly since his death, Alvarez has spoken less kindly of Ted, although television and radio producers have included him as a 'friend' in posthumous appraisals of the poet's work. By using the word, Alvarez has seemed to express disapproval of ideas derived from inferior traditions, a stance in itself not dissimilar to Eliot's views about Blake. His supporting remarks hinted at rather more, a contempt for thinking that struck him as confused and sub-intellectual. By speaking of Ted's 'shamanism' Alvarez was in fact dismissing much of Ted's poetry since Lupercal as messy.

Long before Hughes and Alvarez fell out, arguments about poetry had again assumed an almost religious ferocity, and as with religious controversy the debate was often

emotionalized and instinctive. Critics, reviewers at least, shot from the hip without much identification of points of aim. The poets themselves, as one who knew them and read with them, played little part in the brawl, but many of them had noisy acolytes. It was the sort of argument Ted tended to smile at and rise above. It certainly gave the lie to any fear that poetry was dead arid draped on the altars of first the novel, then film, then television.

Alvarez himself had been an energetic infuser of this new vitality, just as he had proved himself to be an urgent campaigner in the quarrel. He was, of course, pre-eminent for a decade as critic, reviewer, editor and anthologist; and he certainly managed to write verse that exemplified his own criteria. His poems (they were not many, another negative requirement of the time) were pithy and clever and went a pace or two beyond the Movement poets. They were 'tough', a very mid-century word. 'Tough' was the blood-group of Alvarez's anthology, *The New Poetry* published in 1962. He thought Ted's poetry was tough too, tough enough for the anthology. Ted's poetry stayed tough, for a time it grew tougher and rougher, but it continued to flow and grow and swarm; and it went off in a narrative and mythological direction that many of his earlier admirers, including Alvarez, were not prepared to consider. Hence the need for a suitably belittling description once Alvarez and Ted fell out. They fell out for other and more personal reasons, of course, and the personal ones probably triggered the conflict in belief. A divorce in affections so often presages a change in faith.

Alvarez was smart to seize upon a term like shamanism. One can never deny the rigor of Ted's work, but it can be presented as a piecemeal rigour, akin to the psalms or a collection of folk utterances – both acknowledged starting points for Ted's thinking. An obvious trigger for such a critical viewpoint was Ted's obsession – not too loaded a word – with animal life. What did it amount to? He wasn't constructing an ongoing fable, nor even a bestiary. From time to time, and perhaps all the time, and not only in 'Thought Fox', there was a magical glitter to his writing, a sense of evocation, as in some of Yeats' poetry, of occult tokens or at least of symbols of the arcane. Yet as I write this, and in thinking of Ted, I have before me a list of magical beasts supposedly drawn up by Albertus Magus as published in one of many books that Ted led me to very early in our acquaintance. There is scarcely any resemblance between that list and anything Ted has written about before or since. Still, Alvarez had a keen nose to track mischief. Ted's work increasingly came with its own aura. Its postures were not accidental. They needed to be accounted for. 'Shamanism' would do very nicely.

I don't know how well Alvarez knew Ted domestically. Anyone who knew him at the time (I first had dealings with him in 1962, but wasn't a frequent house-guest until 1968) would have been aware of his interest in wild and unusual events, stories with preposterous, surreal or supernatural endings. It was well known that he had rejected his Literature course at Cambridge in favour of Anthropology, so it was all too easy to cite his wilder flights of fancy, his enthusiasm for primitivism and the oral tradition, as a rejection not merely of the literary but of the literal as well. Easy but shallow. Ted's approach to wild stories, whether they were found in the writings of Lethbridge, Daniken and, later, Carlos Castaneda, was very similar to Karen Armstrong's account of the

Hebrew creation myths. He felt they represented a truth but was clear they weren't based on fact. Lethbridge caused him to pause longer than some, because Lethbridge conducted experiments, much as Ted did himself. But he spoke about them all with what can best be described as enthusiastic amusement. They enlivened a day's chat while pacing from pool to pool on a trout river or searching a wood for fox or badger sets, but they could as easily be rejected as trivial. They were bedtime books. Lethbridge aside, they weren't for the shelf. The same could be said for the myriad publications on the Kabala (I'm speaking of it as it was in the sixties and seventies, not as it has reemerged today as an overblown cult for pop-stars).

Then there was Idries Shah on Sufism, or rather Idries Shah on everything save Sufism. Ted did not reject the myths of Sufism itself. They were facts insofar as they represented the belief system of an ethnic group: as an anthropologist he treated them seriously. He also respected the use that Peter Brook could make of them in theatrical production, though he repeated with raised eyebrows some of Peter's stories about his encounters with Sufi rituals in the desert. There was another dimension here. Ted loved telling stories. He regarded a good story as a form that possessed a force of its own, something that existed quite apart from the elegance or vulgarity of its language or its connection to truth or relationship with probability. I have heard him repeat anecdotes from books he otherwise rubbished – treatises on topics as various as the Bermuda triangle, Einstein's involvement with invisible warships, out-of-the-body experiences, the conversion of astral to physical flight – repeat them and say as he said frequently in public and private, and more than once wrote, that there was magic in a good story.

I don't know to what extent Alvarez and some of the later denigrators gained an insight into Ted's family life as distinct from his social milieu. His sister Olwyn's enthusiasm for I'Chin, together with Ted's own amusement with and later disdain for Ouija, would have suggested a considerable interest in the occult, as would his group experiments in psychokinesis or telepathy.

Experiments were precisely what they were, though. I have several times joined an Ouija circle with Ted, Olwyn and others. He never suggested the exercise and often did his best to avoid it as being trivial or open to corruption. The last time I sat with him over an Ouija board was during the Christmas or year's end of 1977. I fancy Olwyn was the prime mover and perhaps the only enthusiast for the adventure. Ted only agreed to participate if (1) the letters were scrambled and (2) placed face down on the board with a neutral – i.e. non-participating – reader appointed. In the end we took turns to read and record the results. Ted still thought the messages were corrupt. He insisted the players wore blindfolds, though later conceded the impossibility of blindfolding a woman. "They see with their ears, and if you muffle their ears they can still see with the tips of their tongues". He was in a bad mood by then and probably invoking Keats' Lamia if not snakes direct. Still convinced that the readings were corrupt, he scrambled the letters between each round, again laying them face down.

A powerful message continued to emerge, possibly menacing him, certainly threatening me. Malign supernatural forces at work? Not according to Ted. He was certain one of us

was rigging the board, and I suppose it is possible to accept that someone squinting down their nose from beneath a displaced blindfold might have been able to recognise marks on the backs of pieces of card or identify different shapes in scraps of torn paper. He certainly did not accept that our fingers were being guided by anyone or anything but ourselves.

But these stories get out. This one has taken a quarter of a century, but the disaffected are less sparing of their tongues. There has been plenty of chat about spells to slow up or retard the burning of candles, and other gossipy exaggerations of experiments in psychokinesis, water-divining with sticks, and Lethbridge-style divining with pendula when none of the occasions amounted to much more than most people explore at some time or other. Most of them arose from someone – not always Ted – suggesting, “If the supper table must have a party game, let’s try this.”

So what do I know about Ted the shaman? Nothing, save that he might have rejoiced in the title before going on to question what exactly Alvarez meant by it. About Ted the occultist in the western tradition I came to know quite a lot, but doubt whether it has much bearing on the substance of his poetry. As noticed earlier, we can detect occultist mannerisms in his earlier work, but only in the means, rarely the matter. When it threatens to emerge fully in a poem like ‘Gog’ or other manifestations in Wodwo it can be quite startling, yet its appearance owes much more to literary influences and superlative poetic invention than to any ancient grimoire. And when it comes fully to birth in Gaudete, what exactly is it? What one discovers in the Reverend Lumb is an erudite Ted Cornish, the Okehampton mystic and healer, kidnapped by Ted and carried off in a poem, even down to his habits of worship, like cuddling trees. Cornish was an impressive man, of course, and several of the West country hospitals would send him terminal cancer cases when they could hold out no more hope for them, and he did achieve some sensational and well-documented acts of healing. Even he went wrong, though, and fell short of expectation in the end. As Ted told me some twenty years after we had all contributed to a television series together: “He used to be impressive, at least in person. Now he’s no more than a third rate spiritualist.” There were probably no first rate spiritualists for Ted, other than spiritual healers, because I fancy he would have regarded spiritualism – man entranced and adrift in some ill-defined etheric sea – as messy, even as a concept.

I was first introduced to certain aspects of the occult by Ted during the Summer of 1968. He supposed I would be receptive to them, though his reasoning was slightly wide of the mark. Still, it was thoughtful and sensitive enough, as always with him when it came to friendship. He knew that I did quite a lot of hypnotism in clubs and at parties (it was then banned from public performance), and we had discussed various experiments we might conduct into the supposed phenomenon of prenatal and even pre-personal memory (the former being very much a clinical talking point of the time and the latter a good topic for after-dinner chat) if only either of us could come up with a suitable and willing volunteer. He knew my poetry: he and Anthony Thwaite had made my *Death on a Live Wire* the Christmas choice of the Poetry Book Society in 1962. More recently he had detected, wrongly as it happened, or wrongly insofar as I was then ignorant of

them, certain magical influences from the oral mythology of the North American Plains Indians in the title poem of my 1967 collection *How Chas Egget Lost his Way in a Creation Myth*.

What happened was we came out of a Daily Mirror committee meeting together with me in a very raw state. My private life was in total disarray, and later that evening I was to be faced with some very difficult decisions. Ted picked this up at once and led me towards the Salisbury in St Martin's Lane for a drink – I thought for a drink, but it was only to stow his gear. The principal destination was to be the place in the adjacent alleyway he always referred to since as 'Watkins' bookshop.'

We were there a long time. He couldn't find what he was looking for; 'old Mr Watkins' wasn't there and he didn't want to ask the assistant, Anna Madge, whom incidentally I already knew from an earlier Daily Mirror committee. (Anna was Kathleen Raine's daughter, and Ted always struck me as being very private about his occult research). Once he realised I was acquainted with her he wouldn't ask her for help. In the end he bought me a very handsome copy, after skim-reading it, of W. E. Butler's *The Magician: his Training and Work*. "This is harmless," he said. "Solid, and harmless but very, very good. Keep it to yourself, read it critically and take from it what you will." Those who know it will agree with Ted's judgment. Butler endorses Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, finds much to commend in formal church worship (though he deplores the average priest's ignorance of the hugeness of the psychic charge it can engender) and only goes beyond the normal confines of prayer by making much of the Banishing Ritual of the Lesser Pentagram. I will certainly endorse it this far. If a man or woman completes the Banishing Ritual (notice the capitalization and deduce of me what you will) he or she will certainly be spared the compulsion to let down the tires of his neighbors' cars or strangle his cats.

I visited Watkins' on a number of occasions after that, not always with Ted. We did not ever perform occultist ritual conjurations together, or join Peter Redgrove and Penelope, who had lain in a circle feet to the moon in order to conceive Zoe. Ted – opening the letter in my presence – said in horror, "The child will be mad!" He then reflected and said, "Should have been head to the moon anyway. You always rope the heifer head to the moon so the usual tides draw the bull's semen deep." Zoe wasn't mad, thank God. We awarded her the top Mirror prize for poetry some sixteen years later. Hardly nepotism, but Ted and I thought it proper to declare an interest before abstaining from the vote.

I still have Butler's *The Magician*. Inside, in Ted's hand, one word is written: Bardoin. It is not a corruption of my name, but the misspelled name of the author Ted was searching for but couldn't find in Watkins' bookshop. Those who know it will recognize a very sinister twentieth century grimoire. A twin grimoire, as it happens. Printed abroad – I think my copies, always scurrying about the library shelves and otherwise elusive, were assembled in India after being translated through several languages without decent copy-editing – the text book itself is full of dark instructions for all manner of lethal conjurations. Its companion volume itemizes a guardian spirit and

counterbalancing demon for every degree of the azimuth, It's a bold magician who plays with the instructions in this book – Eliphas Levi once embarked on a similar line of conjuration and nearly lost his mind.

Did Ted ever cut the rod and sprinkle the salt? You would not expect me to know or him to say. It is not a game two people can play together, and all I can reveal as his palimpsest is that I once found the Banishing Ritual of the Lesser Pentagram and so-called Magic Mirror very helpful in life. That was a long time ago. Ted and I rarely discussed it before or after, though for a few years Olwyn referred to us as 'you magicians'.

When things were going badly for either of us, Ted would remind me to light a candle before taking up my pen; but if challenged he would have a scientific as well as a psychic reason: candle-flame is a good ioniser. Later he and Carol bought electric ionisers for their house, as do many other people and most dairymen. Ionisers keep cattle and humans calm. Afterwards Ted and Carol could tell many a story about stormy guests breezing towards gentler relationships. "Are people getting to you?" he would sometimes ask on the phone. "Me too, till yesterday. Then I gave myself time to refashion my astral cloak. Spend some time on yourself."

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and the Theatre
by Tim Supple.
©Tim Supple

My first collaboration with Ted Hughes in the theatre was a near-miss. After that we worked together on three projects, but I always felt that we were working towards the one that would really speak our joint mind. Sadly we never got there. The curious, stop-start journey was interrupted by Ted's suddenly startling death.

We began at the Young Vic theatre – almost. I was beginning as Artistic Director, Ted was around watching a stage adaptation (with music by Pete Townshend) of The Iron Man. I wanted to make a vivid and untamed stage version of Grimms' fairy tales and thought Ted would be an ideal writer of new versions of the tales. I wrote him a note but heard nothing. This led me to begin another fruitful collaboration with the poet Carol Ann Duffy who wrote fantastic versions. But, surprisingly, it also led to the collaboration with Ted. Strangely, naively I thought, Ted did drop me a scrawled note about a week before rehearsal apologising for his silence and asking me if it was too late for him to write Grimm Tales (as it was called) for us.

As I got to know him I realised that this was not naivety but an essential quality of Ted's. He was not part of the culture of work and time and deadlines. He would drop in at the

Young Vic from time to time, oblivious to the character culture of the meetings in which I worked and to the effect he would have when he just came and sat in rehearsals – how he would change the atmosphere of a room. To my shame I never yielded fully to this irresponsible, haphazard side of his. I would always squirm, uncomfortable at the collision, and somehow would signal to Ted that it was not easy to have him just hanging around like that. It was the same un-tamed quality that led him to assume that it even might be alright to start on a version a week before rehearsals. And it was the same quality that led him to come and see the show unannounced and like it so much he wrote to me making it clear that he wanted to work with me. And it was the same quality that led him to phone out of the blue after he saw my production of *Twelfth Night* at the Young Vic and to talk for a long time about how much I had given him, how much I had shown him in this and my previous Shakespeare production (*Comedy of Errors* for the RSC). I was amazed and thankfully, instinctively, felt it was not appropriate to put the phone down and rush to the next meeting. He was telling me his feelings because he knew he was ill and I didn't. It was the penultimate conversation I had with Ted.

The first proper conversation I had with him was on the phone. After he wrote to me about *Grimm Tales* I knew that a spark between us had occurred. The RSC had asked me to direct a play, I chose Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* and asked Ted to write a new version. He was not an obvious choice. His work in the theatre had never taken him to either modern plays or German classics. Nor was there any identifiable track record in realistic dramatic dialogue. All I knew of Ted's theatre work was his time with Peter Brooke: *Orghast*, Seneca's *Oedipus* and the folk stories he created on demand for the early experiments at the Bouffes du Nord in Paris. The last version of *Spring Awakening* in English had been written by Edward Bond. Ted didn't read German. But I had a strong feeling that his sensibility would animate the poetic core of the play. Academic versions gave off a whiff of awkward late-nineteenth-century formality, and Bond's version, while excellent in many ways, reflected his own political priorities. It has a Brechtian toughness that gives the play real clarity but does not capture the spirit of the play as I felt it to be.

I concluded that Ted might be able to express the wildness of the sexual interior shared by the children in the play, and to bring to life the mythic shadow that they feel to be looming over them. The children have the education and awareness to refer to their own awakenings in mythic terms but of course they do not see the full possibilities and dangers of their actions – suicide, pregnancy, tragic death in abortion are the unforeseen destinations of their repressed yearnings. And part of the play's brilliance is to portray this outer darkness with a mystical quality that matches the children's own sense of the mystery of their feelings. Parents, school, teachers, penal reform are all portrayed with realistic force but also some uncomfortable mythical character.

Ted worked from a literal translation from the German and, making his own choices, he consulted all the other English versions in front of him. I did not need to ask him to change much. His writing of the children was immensely strong – full of a power of phrase that lay in part within and in part outside their awareness. The parents too had a fresh vividness, brought to life by his innate humanity and sympathy. The tendency in

the play to stereotype the adults was softened in Ted's version of the parents. Instead their own confusions and desires were evoked. On the other hand I felt that the teachers were less successful. There was something in the verbose satire that I felt did not interest him so much. These characters are to be observed, they do not really live and so there was not room, in a faithful version as Ted's was, for the poetry or humanity of spirit that he excels in. Something in the teachers remained too stubbornly urbane and intellectual to really inspire him.

In production Ted's version of *Spring Awakening* was infused with an intensely powerful sense of an unknown force. Lurking around the edge of the action, within the words was a sweet, magnetic menace. His phrasing brought a continual resonance to the stage of the tragedy of awakening, of love destroyed. He was clearly, as all poets must, mining his own emotional experience. One of the very few phrases that I remember asking him to change did this too overtly – a character referred to the gas oven. I asked him to change this not because of the personal reference but because it was anachronistic – the play is set in the late Eighteen hundreds. But it revealed the deep connections he was making. It is characteristic of Ted that instead of highlighting the absurdity or injustice of the repression that leads to shame, guilt and tragedy, his version simply suggests that such repression is doomed. Our overwhelming need to be as we have always been – to lust and love – will not be controlled by the fear or restraint of social convention. It will simply turn to tragedy.

Ted's great contribution to the production extended beyond his version. He would come to rehearsals, whenever he could, and sit and listen (more than watch). He was always ready to help, advise and comment. It was illuminating that many of the adult actors, trained in the conventional preciousness of the British theatre, exacerbated by too many years at the RSC, greeted his presence with fear and incomprehension. They were not really open to the different way in which Ted saw and spoke about the play. He did not use the simplifying, polite, manipulative directions they felt comfortable with. He spoke on an altogether more demanding level. But he was far more interested in the children and they in him. Entirely open of course and not corseted in habit, pride and fear, they loved his observations and he was able to unlock a depth in the way they saw their roles. However much Ted seemed to enjoy the process of *Spring Awakening* – I could see that he especially liked being in rehearsal, leaning back against some steps I remember, his head cocked toward the ceiling, seeming to sniff the words in the air.

I had to bribe him to do Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. Not because he needed persuading of its genius, far from it. We were at dinner after an early show of the Wedekind at The Barbican with his great friends Michael and Clare Morpergo when someone asked what I was doing next. I mentioned *Blood Wedding* as a piece that had been on my mind for years and whose time, I felt had come. This provoked in Ted an extraordinary crystallisation of why Lorca's approach to drama was unrivalled. I had never heard him speak about Lorca before but I was gripped by the intensity of his passion for the young Spanish poet. Ted talked about every great writer having a core project – an explosive centre that reverberates throughout their work. Lorca's, he said, was encapsulated in the essay on duende. The more I got to know Ted, the more I realised that he truly

believed in this demonic spirit of performance - this moment that every performance aspires to, consciously or not, in which the actor and audience will experience together a kind of madness. Such an intensity of expression and sensation transcend all thought and discussion of fussy issues like technical quality. Ted once confided in me that he agreed with Peter Brook's observation that the RSC actually ruined most actors because too long a time with the company developed too much consciousness of the verse and how to speak it. When we did *Blood Wedding* he only came to rehearsals once. He told me after it had opened that I had chosen the wrong actors and in most cases he was right. Ted was instinctive as well as very bright and his magnificent nose smelt the stiffness in the room, the uptight actorly concerns, the lack of much possibility of duende.

I don't think I fully grasped duende at the time. Maybe I didn't fully believe in it. Certainly I think Ted sometimes imagined it when it wasn't there, so strong was his desire to capture it. I got a step closer to understanding when I worked on his Ovid translations. But it was finally in India – watching a Thayyam in Kerala, with 12 drums beating incessantly and a dancer in the form of an old crone trying to beautify herself and become young again, working himself into a frenzy over hours as he went across to the other side to meet the gods and drawing the crowd into the frenzy with him – that I felt it and was able to bring that feeling back to the stage.

While Ted had this huge admiration for Lorca he was reluctant to do a translation – I'm sure he had other things on his mind. He was not to be drawn even though I pursued it vigorously. In the end he asked me to help read through a volume of plays by children about environmental concern that he was editing and I said I would if he would do *Blood Wedding*. His deep, loose laugh resonated down the phone and I knew I had him.

Ted worked on the text as he had Wedekind's. We had a literal translation done especially for him, and once again he sat with all the other published English versions in front of him. His rendition of the play is immensely successful – even more than that of *Spring Awakening*. He grasps the bare, blunt fierceness of the writing and states it without adornment or explanation. He takes something essentially Spanish and hears in it the language of the soil and the folk ritual and lets that language re-emerge as something entirely English. The text was far better than the production and the actors cannot be blamed for that. Myself and my collaborators – a trusted, brilliant team of designer, composer, lighting designer – were just too complicated, too aesthetic, not direct enough. In casting, in design, in composition and in conception.

Ted said three things during the time we worked on Lorca's play, from which I learned a great deal about why it didn't work. When we were preparing its production, he asked how it was going. I said it was fine, but we were struggling over the design. 'Design?' he said, 'what design do you need? A pot for civilisation and a bush for the wild'. Even though I still don't agree entirely, it's a vision against which any obfuscating idea must be tested.

Just before the show opened Ted had to do a number of press interviews. He was

reluctant – ‘never talk about anything before it is finished’ was his view. He agreed, to help sell the show, but only on the condition that they interview me, too. The editors were devious, they agreed but then cut me out – words and pictures! Ted was devastated, and when the show was not what we hoped, he said, ‘you see, we cursed it, we said too much and trusted them when we shouldn’t’. Again, I can’t say that I share the power of his belief but I trust his instinct that poetry is delicate until it is ready to be shared and that theatre has that same vulnerable nature. His last observation was after the event. He made one comment about the show apart from the one about casting and he made it with the supportive generosity that all great theatre spirits have. ‘You know, I think that Lorca’s theatre was much more simple [or did he say simpler?] than we imagine, and more anarchic. A bit like a street pageant or carnival. It would have been much cruder than we think.’ That was it, and he was right. And he knew this from the words.

Our next collaboration happened through one phone call only. Ted never saw anything of rehearsals or production. And our sole conversation was the one when he told me that he was ill. However he had done his work - he had written the most superb theatre text I could hope for in *Tales from Ovid*. The narrative tension, the sensual insight, the violent, mythic glee (a favourite word of his), made theatre a natural home for the work. If there was ever a work that bridged Ted’s artistry as a poet and a dramatist it was *Tales from Ovid*.

The idea to make theatre from the stories began with Simon Reade, then dramaturg at the RSC. He suggested it to both of us and we all agreed that I and Simon would take care of dramatisation and run any decisions past Ted. Rehearsals were due to begin in January 1999. Sometime before, Ted phoned me to say that he was ill and wouldn’t be around much as he had to give it attention. Very soon after, he was dead.

Rehearsals for the *Ovid* were always charged by the effortless intensity of Ted’s writing. Lucid, blunt, lithe, it was Shakespearean, Ovidian and Hughesian all at once. And there, for me, is the point about Ted – the reason why he was such a fine dramatic poet. He understood Shakespeare, and he understood Ovid and he stood alongside them both. In Shakespeare he saw the simultaneous existence of the real and the mythic plane – and he also recognised the ruthless clarity with which Shakespeare nails his intention and keeps on nailing it until he gets it. Ted, successfully, made this intention his own and applied it brilliantly to Ovid. He saw how much Ovid was in Shakespeare and he brought them both alive within his own unique dramatic shape.

Our last collaboration was the one that we were working towards - *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. I only had to ask Ted once and he picked up his pen (old typewriter actually). He made one set of brilliant notes - as brief and as penetrating a synopsis as I have read in these days of treatments, outlines and pitches – with such flow I knew that this project, one in which our interests met perfectly, would be unstoppable. Unfortunately that was all he could do before he died.

Faber

Frank Wedekind, *Spring Awakening*: A new version by Ted Hughes was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Pit in the Barbican on 2 August 1995. Director: Tim Supple.

Federico Garcia Lorca, *Blood Wedding*: A new version by Ted Hughes was first performed at the Young Vic Theatre on 20th September, 1996. Director: Tim Supple

Tales from Ovid (7AD) by Ted Hughes (1997), adapted by Tim Supple and Simon Reade, received its world premiere at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, on 9th April 1999. Director: Tim Supple. Designer and co-director: Melly Still

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalThe Thanksgiving and Memorial Service for Ted Hughes, Westminster Abbey, 13th May 1999
© Ann Skea

Fear no more the heat of the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done.
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney sweepers, come to dust

The soft Yorkshire accent filled the Abbey and it was a moment before we realised that this was Ted's voice reading the Song from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. It was an amazing, eerie and magical Experience. Nothing in the service so far, not the music, nor the singing and reading of Ted's poetry, nor even the eulogy of his friend, Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, matched the impact of hearing his voice again. The congregation listened in absolute silence, spellbound.

I never imagined, when I first began to study Ted Hughes's poetry at the University of New England (NSW, Australia) in 1970, and was drawn to his unsentimental and deep love of nature, that he would become England's Poet Laureate. Nor did I ever imagine that I would meet him and become a friend, or that I would eventually sit in Westminster Abbey at his Memorial Service just across the aisle from the Prince of Wales and the Queen Mother.

I vividly remember the first impact of Ted's poetry on me and the inspiring lecture which Alison Hoddinott gave on his work. Ted Hughes was one of the 'New Poetry' poets, along with Thom Gunn and Philip Larkin, included in the English 100 reading list in 1970. Although I enjoyed the other poets' work, Ted's struck a chord with me because of his clear-sighted acceptance of the violence in nature and of our own place in this

natural world. He clearly deplored our propensity for blinding ourselves to the fearful symmetry of birth and death, and our 'Egg Head' arrogance in believing that we could control it all. He was, although no-one commented on this until quite recently, a poet-ecologist – anxious that we should be aware of the delicately balanced web of energies of which we are a part.

Over the years, I continued to read and enjoy Ted's poetry but my eventual decision to write my Ph.D thesis on it came about almost by accident. Thinking about his poem, 'The Bull Moses', I formed a vague idea that a certain amount of mythology was involved in Ted's work and that I would like to explore this further. So I chose "Myth, History and Religion in the work of Hughes, Yeats and Graves" as my M.Litt. dissertation topic. I soon realised that Ted's poetry was immersed in, indeed grew from, myth. Graves and Yeats went by the board, so did history. Myth and religion led to Blake and alchemy and sixteenth-century Neo-Platonism, and I soon had so much fascinating material that to stop my research when my M.Litt. was finished would have been almost impossible for me. So, I went on.

My Ph.D supervisor, Dr Geoff Gunther, had a deep interest in mysticism and Eastern religions and was able to offer valuable advice as I explored Ted's use of these philosophies, and Alison Hoddinott, when Geoff was on sabbatical, managed to suitably restrain my enthusiasm for Ted's occult interests (his "dottier beliefs", as one critic recently described them).

Meanwhile, I wrote to Ted with a question about the alchemy in *Cave Birds*. His reply was friendly and wonderfully detailed and he replied to a later query in the same way, but he was never a frequent correspondent, his poetry always came first. And in spite of my frequent visits to England for family reasons, I was reluctant to try and arrange a meeting with him. Partly this was because I knew how many demands there already were on his time, partly it was my own need to maintain some objectivity in my writing, and partly it was sheer nervousness. I had followed Ted's footsteps along such esoteric, difficult and often obscure pathways in the realms of knowledge that I was in awe of him. Our meeting, when it did occur, was suitably in line with his occult beliefs in the stars and predestination. I literally bumped into him.

I had just arrived in England when I read that Ted was giving one of his rare poetry readings at the opening session of the Cheltenham Festival. I just happened to have that time free, and I just happened to have a cousin living in Cheltenham, so I decided to go. The reading, as it turned out, was awful. Two other poets also read from their work, but the acoustics in the hall were so bad that it sounded as if all three were reading simultaneously from different sides of the room. I did not manage to contact Ted before the reading and I knew that public book-signing was something he never did, so after the session I decided to leave. I was walking out of the building when I changed my mind and turned to go back in – and walked straight into Ted, who was creeping away as unobtrusively as his impressive six-foot stature would allow. I introduced myself and he was warm and friendly, told me he was just off to Ireland, and wrote down his unlisted phone-number for me and urged me to ring him when he got back.

A week later, we met at Ted's home in Devon and he took me and my husband, David, for a huge Devonshire Tea in a Dartmoor village. On the dashboard of his car lay a few hand-tied fishing-flies. His car was a muddle of boots and fishing-gear, and he drove like a country farmer (which he was) who is used to having the road to himself. We talked about faith-healing, astrology (his sister, Olwyn, it seems, is the expert), poetry competitions, artists, fads in literary criticism, other poets and, just in passing, what Ted was working on at that time. He had, always, a very strong, superstitious belief that to discuss his current work was unlucky.

After this, I met Ted several more times in Devon and in London and, at the time when he asked me to help collate his manuscripts (since sold to Emory University) David and I stayed on his farm, Moortown, in Devon. I grew to think of him as a gentle giant, warm-hearted and generous, with a sharp, Yorkshireman's, sense of humour and a formidable range of knowledge. His commitment to poetry and to reviving and fostering the imaginative energies in our world was total.

My last conversation with Ted was only ten days before his death. I knew he had been unwell, but did not know just how ill he really was. He sounded full of energy and enthusiasm. The stage production of his translation of Racine's *Phaedra* was receiving good reviews in London, and he joked about an old lady who had sat behind him at one of the afternoon performances he attended and who had loudly voiced the opinion that she would not like to be Dianna Rigg and "have to go through all that again tonight". He also wanted me to see his translation of the *Oresteia*: "The best thing I have ever done", he said, and promised to send me a copy. We planned to meet before I left England, but sadly his and my family commitments prevented that.

It was a great shock to hear of his death on the day I arrived home in Sydney.

Ted was never a lover of celebrity, pomp or grandeur. But he did believe in the value of rituals and he had a deep respect for the ancient and traditional relationship between the poet/bard, the people and their ruler. Westminster Abbey, the Queen's church, was a beautiful and appropriate setting for this ritual celebration of Ted's life and work. And the ceremony, as the Dean of Westminster said, was "an unusual. service for an unusual man". It was simple, full of poetry and music, and Ted would have loved it.

Representatives of the Queen and Prince Philip, together with the Prince of Wales – who showed touching concern for his grandmother, the Queen Mother, who sat beside him – and Ted's family and friends sat in the north and south transepts close to the High Alter. This was where I sat, and in this comparatively small area occasional shafts of sunlight shone down on us through the stained glass windows and illuminated the readers and singers. Beyond us, State and Church dignitaries sat in the Quire, which separates the transepts from the main body of the church. And beyond them, sat some thousand people who loved Ted's poetry enough to have written to the Abbey for tickets. Many well-know and influential literary people were there, but the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, governed by the dignity of Abbey procedures but never

pompous.

After the National Anthem and the Collegiate and Royal Procession, the service began with the ethereal voices of The Tallis Scholars singing, "Miserere nostri Domine". Shusha Guppy sang a poem Ted had written especially for her; Michael Baldwin, Lord Gowrie, Dr Caroline Tisdall and Seamus Heaney spoke and read poems by Ted; Alfred Brendel played the Adagio from Beethoven's Sonata No. 17 in D; and we all sang "The Lord's my shepherd" and William Blake's much loved and very patriotic "Jerusalem". The service ended with The Tallis Scholars singing "Spem in Alium", which had been chosen for the service by Carol Hughes, and with organ music by Bach.

Music in the Abbey sounds magnificent but the spoken word gets lost in the echoes. Nevertheless, Heaney's reading of 'That Morning' reduced me to tears, partly because of the power of the poem itself and partly because I finally accepted that Ted is no longer there for me to write and talk to. I was not the only one to be so moved, especially when we listened to Ted's recorded voice.

Carol, Ted's wife, was amazing. She sat, beautiful and calm throughout the service, which must have been as difficult for her as it clearly was for Nicholas, Ted's son, his daughter Freida, and his sister Olwyn. Ted's older brother, Gerald, who lives in Australia, was also there. After the service, all the family gathered just inside the Abbey's main doors and talked casually to people as they left. Outside, the police held back gawping tourists.

I, and a few other 'Hughes scholars', who had last met at a conference in Cairo several years ago, gathered by the Abbey Bookshop and then repaired to the Duke of Marlborough for some lunch. We agreed that Ted would have approved our choice and have joined us if he could. We also agreed that he had left us with a blessing:

No exorciser harm thee!
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!
Nothing ill come near thee!
Quiet consumation have;
And renowned be thy grave!
For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at
ann@skea.com

[Go to The Ted Hughes Homepage](#)

[Return to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalOrghast: Interview with Ted Hughes by Peter Wilson. 5th Festival of Arts. Shiraz -Persepolis.
Tamasha Daily Bulletin. Week. Aug.[sic] Sept. 1st 1971

In Spring 2015, Vali Mahlouji curated A Utopian Stage: Festival of Arts Shiraz-Persepolis at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, in which a display of rare archive film, photographs, theatre programmes and posters from the 1971 festival was exhibited. Amongst this material was a copy of The Tamasha Daily Bulletin which included this interview with Ted Hughes about Orghast.

My transcript of this interview appears here courtesy of Peter Wilson and Vali Mahlouji of Archaeology of the Final Decade.

Transcript © Ann Skea.

Interview with Ted Hughes Author of Orghast.

Ted Hughes' voice has the lilting but solid quality of his native Yorkshire: quality which seems to reappear in his poetry with a mirror-like clarity and intensity. It's not surprising that a poet of British (but not specifically English) heritage should want to experiment with pure sound, what is surprising is that he is the first to do so. (The only parallel I can think of is Michael McClure's Ghost Tantras, mixtures of strong image-words with a made up "beast" language which also, interestingly makes extensive use of the GHR root). Whether Orghast is a success as a poetic-drama medium is a question raised by the majority of people who have seen the play, and even to a certain extent by Hughes himself. But that it is a powerfully beautiful collection of sounds, with a musical logic of their own, no one can deny. Certainly a great deal, if not all, of the essential structure of the play stems from the beauty of this tongue (which might be a better word than language) but also it cannot be denied that the obscurity, the failure in communication that some felt, must also be attributable to it.

Hughes emphasises that Orghast is a dramatic language; that is, it would not succeed in lyrical poetry, where it would be reduced to mere sound. In writing a poem, you follow language, or rather, language follows the poem: sound itself must be the vehicle for meaning. Theatre, however, adapts language to a system of action, it is applied language. As a matter of fact, Hughes and Brook started work on their mythological themes in English. Hughes found that, after having one successful scene, he had come up against a wall, a limit called "literature"; Brook then made the still unformed suggestion that he try an experiment in syllabic sound; nothing more. The first scene in the new language made its appearance, and the enthusiasm of the actors, their immediate grasping of the pure-theatre possibilities of the idea, brought about the decision to continue the process. In his version of Senecas Oedipus, he felt he had taken dramatic-english as far in a certain direction as he could take it. He describes it as bare, bald and brief, and completely imageless. When he tried to go further, all his attempts came out mere literature, distractions from the primordial content which had engaged him. A literary language, he felt, would cut the listener off from, for example, the depths of savagery expressed by the Japanese actor in his 'murders'.

Orghast has a grammar, because it began to insist on it of its own volition (an experience known to artists in more than one context). The actors even pointed out to him certain regularities which he had not noticed. But, although the words do have, or

began with, specific meanings, so that a scene written in English could be translated into Orghast, he was not out to construct a new Esperanto. The roots of the words are fixed, Orghast is a strict series, but the vowels have been left free around it (He says that he finds that an actor treats the same root quite differently when it is written with 5 'E's than when with 2). The existent languages he feels it most resembles are Gaelic, which looks dense and unpronounceably guttural when written, but is spoken very lightly; and the Anglo-Saxon dialect of the north of England, which in fact is guttural, even harsh, and is the source from which our language derives its characteristic strengths. English, he quotes someone as saying, is an Aristotelian rubbish-heap of unused and delightful possibilities; while French is Platonic, a language of perfect spheres. The French poets have paid for the perfection achieved by their writers of the past, with a despair as to where their language can possibly go. English is far from being in this fix, however. Orghast came out, not of any lack in the possibilities of English, but of the exigencies of the play Orghast.

The purpose of Orghast, play and language, is an inner transformation, an opening to a lost world which is the chosen realm of the I.C.T.R. [Brook's International Centre for Theatre Research]. Music is already such a language, precise and mysterious. Like music, Orghast is at no point meant to engage the cerebration which cuts us off from this deeper world. Music is more sophisticated and evolved, however; imagine music buried for 5000 years, decayed back to its sources, then unearthed: this is the ideal of Orghast. It must lack the complexities of civilisation but belong to human beings at a basic level of experience. This is precisely the aspect of Orghast which makes it difficult to call it a language in the sense we know of, a system of fixed, semantic-symbolic references, reflections far removed from direct communication. Each word of it can shift as poetic image shifts, modifiable by setting. Another comparison, though not an equivalent, might be the mantra, in that both are magical attempts to by-pass the limitations of reason. Any word can be a mantra, even a trivial word, if it is spoken correctly. Avesta was such a language, having no practical use but being used solely for religious recitation and incantation. Orghast, like mantra, possesses a fixed system in order to open it to magic. Hughes admits that he studied the theory of magic in the past, and that those studies have to a certain extent come to fruition in Orghast.

When an actor is opened to different states of consciousness, this must be automatically communicated to the audience. Hughes, like Brook, admits that the play is not a complete success, since this process of transmission has by no means reached its limit; he also prefers to use the term 'work-in-progress'. But he finds the play as produced cathartic, not in the sense of emotion aroused and purged, but in that the action takes the audience up a certain observed path of violence and ritual, ending in the meditation-in-the-dark, and resulting in a change of consciousness, a coming out different on the other side. (I experienced this as a purified calm; others may possibly have felt differently). The word "up" is very important in this context. Hughes and Brook are both interested in achieving transcendence and the total audience involvement of the Ta'zieh*, but are aware of the fact that no body of myth or material exists for modern man that would guarantee this possibility. Hughes says, and he is not joking, that one answer to this might be to have the audience live with the actors through the birth,

growth and perfection of a play, for them to become in fact as integral to theatre itself as the players. In the absence of a tradition of really ultimate power to draw on, Orghast is yet very far from consisting of a break with tradition, rather, its purpose, and the work of the I.C.T.R. in general, is to discover what is alive, what is viable in tradition. In my opinion, such an ambition is the only one worth having in the theatre; and I would far rather see “work-in-progress” from Hughes and Brook than the most polished triviality just about anyone else is currently offering.

(Note: Mr Hughes was kind enough to lend me a copy of his latest book, *Crow*. Unfortunately we haven't enough space to reproduce any of it here, but for anyone interested in finding clues to the motive behind Orghast, I recommend especially 'The Battle of Osfrontalis', and 'Crow Goes Hunting').

Peter Wilson

*Ta'zieh: meaning comfort, condolence. In Persian cultural reference, a kind of “condolence theatre”: a drama inspired by historical or religious events, conveyed wholly through music and song and often based on heroic tales of love, sacrifice and resistance to evil.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document or of any document linked to this page contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 StrictAn Interview with Ted Hughes

Interviewer: Amzed Hossein

Transcript © Amzed Hossein.

(Reproduced here with the permission of Dr. Amzed Hossein and Mrs Carol Hughes).

NOTE: This is the transcript of a tape-recorded interview with Ted Hughes. I met Hughes in Dhaka, Bangladesh, during the Asia Poetry Festival, 17-19 November 1989, where he was a Special Guest. The interview was conducted in two sessions, one at the Osmani Milanayatan, the venue of the Poetry Festival, during a tea-break on 18 November, and another in his room at Sonargaon Hotel, on 20 November. Amzed Hossein.

Amzed Hossein: Mr. Hughes, what exactly do you mean by the 'bigger energy', which you say (in your London Magazine interview, January 1971) you want to invoke through the animals in your poetry?

Ted Hughes: No, it isn't that I want to invoke anything. It's that in writing about certain things, in invoking certain images, certain symbols, you automatically invoke the energies that come with them. So in the whole register of levels or degrees of intensity of energy that can be invoked, corresponding to your whole register of symbols that will

invoke them, you have to be very selective, you have to be very careful, you have to know that you're playing with fire, and that some energies, the one pole of the whole range of energies, the one extreme of the range of the energies, is... can be unmanageable, can invoke energies that are unmanageable. And I think, for instance, that traditionally in almost all cultures, the images of big, predatory animals have represented energies that are difficult to control.

And, as I remember it, my point was that having concentrated on a symbol of this kind, in a particular animal, in order then to control whatever I might be summoning into my life with that symbol, I then wrote another poem with it to control it.

So it was as though I felt that in focusing on that particular symbol, just of that animal, trying to create that animal in that way, I might have summoned things into my life that'd be difficult to control. So I then made in the same poem a controlling poem which confined and controlled its energies as if you'd summoned the spirit into a magic circle which would control it. That was my meaning.

AH: About 'Hawk Roosting' you say what you meant was that simply Nature is thinking. What is your idea of Nature?

TH: Nature in the sense that the hawk only knows its own energy and its own purpose. It doesn't compare its own energy and its own purpose with any other. And so in that sense the symbol of any element in the created universe, any living element, each one of which is fundamentally indifferent to the others,... maybe it is deeply aware of the others but in order to live it has to be indifferent, because it has to prey on them and devour them to live on.

And also, the hawk represents a natural world in that the natural, the living world, the animal kingdom which are the bird, the fish, insect, the whole biological kingdom, is unaware of death. Only man knows of death, knows beforehand of death. Animals only know of death when they are beginning to die and even then maybe they don't know the process. That was my meaning.

And the hawk, in the early phases of writing it out, I had in my mind the notion of the Egyptian Horus, who was the hawk... who was the rising sun; so he was the sun in its positive phase, so he was the first original living energy in its positive phase. But that means a very destructive phase... [Interruption].

AH: In Wodwo what is your quest? What are you searching for? In the 'Author's Note' there you say that the verse and the prose are 'parts of a single work', 'chapters of a single adventure'. Would you please elaborate?

TH: I suppose I am searching for what everybody is searching for... I am searching for myself, searching for ways to confront myself. Because in the West,... I don't know how it is in the East, because your whole culture is so deeply different, and your psychology is so deeply different, because of your religion, long history, different spiritual

background... but in the West, our history has resulted in a psychology where human beings very easily lose touch with themselves.

Sounds ridiculous, of course, but it is the condition of most Westerners that they are no longer in touch with their real self, their own selves, and it is everybody's task in the West, and I suppose in the world actually, but, certainly it's an acute cultural preoccupation in the West, it is the business of confronting what really matters with your self, what really matters. And it is so easy to evade that, because we've no religious system that brings us face to face with that culturally. We have to do it ourselves, every man on his own. So it is most easy to avoid it, and find some way of life where you just simply never confront the problems that are really the basis of your own mind.

AH: Please tell me something about your poetic technique in Crow, about your method of working in poem cycles or poem - sequences.

TH: Yes, well, it's just a method.

AH: It's a method, but the poems are independent, yet it seems they are somehow related, doesn't it? Why is it so?

TH: It was originally a story. That book is really just a fragment. I had the idea of a much longer story - the whole story is much fuller, longer and those are just pieces picked out here and there in the adventure.

The whole story is more like a... My model was really The Conference of the Birds, you know, the Attar poem - that book by the Sufi poet... I'd a notion of a journey of that kind in the background, of a creature that starts out, like one of the birds in The Conference of the Birds, separated from everything, just a creature with no attribute whatsoever except the will to keep searching. And then I was to take him through all his adventures, through the Seven Valleys until he found himself.

In this story of The Conference of the Birds, the birds search for themselves, they find the Simurg, the thirty birds, they find themselves. And that was the notion, the large notion, the quest behind.

But this search for himself in my story was more developed in the sense that in finding himself he was looking for his Creator, he was looking for who'd created him... and in searching for who'd created him he had to first of all find himself and then he would have found who'd created him, that there would be the understanding, the enlightenment for who'd created him. And the evidence that accumulates through his adventures is that he's been created by just a female, that maybe he was created by his mother, or maybe he was created by the universe which is in a sense female, by a goddess, Mother Goddess, or what does it mean? She may be the [object of the] quest... that is the quest.

It's a poem where the protagonist discovers that the universe that he exists in, and not

necessarily we exist in, but he exists in, is a feminine universe.

AH: So is the theme in the Cave Birds... ?

TH: I suppose Cave Birds is really not unlike that. Cave Birds goes through... again a little adventure... where the protagonist who is a Crow, a kind of Crow, kind of raven, is judged for his mistakes, his sins and his mistakes, and his sins are in the form of cockerels and chickens. So it's as if the Crow was full of a sinning cockerel, a sinning foolish chicken. He is judged by owls, he is taken in the underworld, is judged in the underworld by the owls, the eagles and falcons and then having confessed all his sins he is executed, and then he goes into the underworld where he is judged and once he's confronted again himself, he is reborn as a falcon.

So he begins as a Crow, he goes through the phase of being a foolish cockerel, he's judged and executed for that, he goes into the underworld where he is judged in the underworld, in a sort of a Hall of Judgement, where he is judged by the owls and the eagles and having encountered himself and purged himself of his sins, he is resurrected as a falcon. That's the story, that's the outline.

AH: Please comment on the expanding, beautiful verse of Gaudete. On the other hand, your verse in Cave Birds is very concentrated, compact. I particularly like the exuberant verse of Gaudete.

TH: The poems at the end?

AH: The poems at the end, well, they are very, you know, very concentrated, precise, almost esoteric, but, well, sometimes, I can't interpret the meaning. There is a female goddess, who, it seems, you offer obeisance to...

TH: Well, it's again a story of the hero that he is an ordinary...

AH: A story of transformation or metamorphosis? A changeling?

TH: Yes, the real hero is a minister, a Christian, a minister in the Christian religion. He is carried away into the other world by the spirits to heal the queen of the world of spirits. The basis of it in England was a story of a legendary poet in Scotland who was carried away by the fairies, to heal the queen of the fairies. And he disappears for seven years; well, that's a combination actually... two-three references are there... and he disappears in the underworld for seven years. And I combined that with another suggestion that while he was away in the underworld, the spirits filled his place in the real world with a substitute, an exact replica made out of a log, but to human beings, to all his men. to all his acquaintances, to be the same man alive.

And so that changeling, made by the spirits or the fairies, out of the log of wood, tries to carry on the work of the Christian minister, and he knows vaguely and dimly that this man's work is the gospel of love. So he interprets this at the crudest level, and he

proceeds to seduce all the women of the neighbourhood, for which, eventually, the husbands, and the men of the neighbourhood, hunt him to death and kill him. And so the changeling is destroyed.

And really the whole story is run parallel to the life of the real man in the other world who is healing the queen of the spirits. And this real man suddenly finds himself back on earth, far away in the West of Ireland, and he's no idea of really what's happened to him, he's like a man, like Rip Van Winkle, come back from some other world and he's writing these strange little poems to this strange female. And I modelled those poems because I was enormously excited at that time by the translations of Tamil Vacanas¹.

AH: I see...

TH: And so they were my version of Tamil Vacanas, not actual Vacanas, but my own contribution to an English tradition of Tamil Vacanas.

AH: I see. I see.

TH: There is one wonderful collection... translations... in English [of Tamil Vacanas]².

AH: Please elaborate a little about the process of psychic birth, death and rebirth which seems to be the theme of many of your later volumes, particularly *Crow*, *Gaudete* and *Cave Birds*.

TH: I think they may be just themes that happen to appear there, because they are part of a whole lot of materials that interested me. But, you know, like many another poets, I see the whole problem that poetry works at, one of the great problems that poetry works at is to renew life, renew the poet's own life and, by implication, renew the life of the people, if they can respond to the way he has done it for himself. And because the tendency of life is to use itself up and encrust itself with an alter ego which imprisons life... this happens very quickly and the inner life then has to somehow break down that crust of ego and be renewed, and so it's a process, really, of the death of what is restraining the new life that is there, and the birth, really the rebirth, of the life that's been smothered. So I think in the work of many poets you can see that as the recurrent basic theme of their successive works.

It's very easy to see, for instance, in the works of Shakespeare where every play, and certainly every tragedy, as he grows older and becomes more serious, every tragedy can be interpreted as an effort of some new tremendous surge of power and feeling to break down an enclosing mistake. And the tragedies are composed of the disastrous circumstance that in breaking down what seems to be the fixed, circumstances that estrange it, he also kills what's most precious to him; it is part of the shape of the tragedies that each play has a figure who goes mad with passion and breaks up something; and that is the vitality of the play, the play as an oeuvre; that he's killed something that is most precious to him, that made it all balanced in the process. It's as though he's gone mad, overbalanced and exhausted himself, and the whole thing is

built up again, and he has to do it again, and he has to do it again, and each of the tragedies does it again. And then eventually, in the later tragedies he finds a way of salvaging this, this, the thing that he loves, he finds out a way, not killing the woman, keeping her alive, seeming to kill her but then it turns out that she hasn't been killed.

AH: You referred to the last poems of Gaudete. Do you attach any particular importance to those poems?

TH: No, but I like them. I'm not sure that it's a form that has a real context in English. So, in a way it was experimental to that extent, but I feel that maybe among English readers of English literature in general, it is a little bit without context because its context is in fact Goddess religions, in particular, the Indian mystical experience. So it is without context in English literature. So I don't know whether it's a form that one can develop within English, because it isn't natural for English. I wish it were.

AH: In Season Songs, Moortown, Remains of Elmet and River, you have been able to reveal what I may describe as the beauty and vitality, the glory and the power of flowers, insects and animals. In a post-industrial or highly industrialized, materialistic-rationalistic civilization, what hope do you have about the creativity or the creative power of nature?

TH: From being very young, I lived very much in the country, and was preoccupied with animals and fish and birds, and, well, that was my life, that was the only thing I was interested in. Then, although I lived in rather an industrial part of England, that is South Yorkshire, right in the coal belt... in Poetry in the Making I talked about it... but then I moved away and all kinds of things happened and so on. And I wrote about other things and I got interested [in other things]; well, my interest took me to another direction away from that natural world that I'd grown up in. Although obviously I still used it but I didn't use it directly... I only used it as a sort of a source of metaphors and language.

But then in the seventies I felt... I was then over forty... I felt that I'd missed it out. You know it was as though I looked around and thought: why have I been neglecting this? And so then for a few years I just wrote about it directly, you know, just for myself, just to write poems about things that I loved and that excited me in that world, just simple, direct poems, because I felt I'd left it out. And I just wanted to reclaim it again, bring it back into my life. And also at that time I was farming and so I was immersed in that world anyway.

And then gradually, you know, I felt I'd reabsorbed it, I'd renewed myself, I'd reclaimed it in a sense and renewed my own relationship with it. And then because I'd engaged myself to do certain books, you know, I'd engaged myself to do a book with Fay Godwin's photographs about South Yorkshire, I'd engaged myself to do a book about rivers with the photographs of a friend of mine, I'd engaged myself to do a book about flowers and insects with a friend of mine who is a painter and a draughtsman and he wanted me to do a book about flowers and insects and I said, yes, I'll write some poems about flowers and insects, and that's the way these books happened.

But in a sense, I feel that they were sort of marginal. Necessary, but marginal. For what really interests me, I think, what really interests me, is something else.

AH: But, you know, I have read somewhere some critics who say that you should proceed along those lines, that is, writing simple, direct nature poems, instead of the mythical poems.

TH: Yes, but you have to remember that the critics you're speaking about are English. They wouldn't be said by Americans. I don't know American critics could say that. I think they must be English. And within your own country, as you know, in Bangladesh, I'm sure, it's the same; whatever work you try to do, everybody tries to stop you - it's - that's a law of writing [laughs]; every writer's impression is that everybody else is trying to stop him writing what he's writing and telling him to write something else, telling him to write what they want him to write, as though you should have sent your pages along to them and said, please write my poems for me before I could publish them. And it's very like that in England.

AH: So you think that these books are marginal?

TH: In my own sense. But others, readers, may not think so. Well, everybody has a taste. And whatever certain readers and reviewers may say about my interest in mythology and folklore and religious literature and so on, it is the thing that interests me more than anything else. It's what I want to incorporate and it's the thing that I enjoy working with. It's the thing that seems to me to give me most access to what I want to express and so I [shrugs] really don't care what they think.

AH: Do you think poetry has a role to play in society?

TH: I think poetry is the psychological component of the auto-immune system, right? So you have the physical auto-immune system and in stress, in any stress, in any disaster, in any grief or mourning or just simply the stress of life, just the day-to-day biological response to the problems of your life, your immune system is in constant activity to repair the effect of this on your own body, on your own system. Your whole chemistry of your body is constantly under bombardment from external things, and your immune system is constantly repairing and renewing it. And that is a physical component of that which is actually a chemical process. But it seems to me that there is also a psychological component of it. And the psychological component is the strange business that we call Art... and poetry is simply the verbal form of that process. That's what I feel.

AH: You studied Anthropology and Archaeology at Cambridge. Have they in any way shaped your poetic attitude?

TH: I studied Anthropology and Archaeology because I was interested in Anthropology and Archaeology. I was already interested in it. So what shaped my poetic attitude, as

you say, maybe because what made me interested in Anthropology and Archaeology. In other words, I was interested in other cultures, simple as that, other cultures, in a life in other cultures; I suppose I was interested in that.

AH: Are you in any way influenced by the contemporary socio-cultural events in England, say the counter-culture movement of 'the swinging sixties'?

TH: You know, I was only thirty years in the swinging sixties. The effect on England of the swinging sixties was to be... it was really when the government was far Left. And the effect was to give confidence to everything in England that was Left. So the effect was to give confidence to a whole range of social energies and voices that had been excluded from cultural expression, really, at all previous times, because that was the first time since the Education Act, just after the War, what used to be called the working classes, and who from the Education Act onwards, began to infiltrate and move into higher education. It was the first time they'd been given the confidence of their voices. And so it had the effect of releasing a great deal that had never been released in England. And it released good and bad. It released that whole range of expression from a part of society that before had hardly spoken. And that lasted maybe into the mid-seventies.

And then the drift back to the Right began, and you could see it in reviews, in every expression of the cultural - sort of disciplinary... controls of how people responded to literature and art and expressions and so on. You could see that as if it swung to the Right, it returned to a repressive situation, as far as those voices were concerned, and they gradually disappeared from expression and were replaced by the old voices of... what's too simple to call... the Right. But they were replaced basically by those cultural values that existed in England before the War.

And so the swinging sixties can be seen, I think, as a moment when, quite suddenly, the Left and all that world which corresponded to the Left, that world which had never really attained expression in England, suddenly had the liberty to express itself and the confidence to express itself... it's a matter of confidence... that had somehow been given the confidence because the Government was Left.

And I don't know whether I was affected by that or not. You must, one must be affected by that kind of broad movement in the community you live in, you have to be affected by it. And it made many things possible which later became difficult, as I think you can see it in many writers. And that whether it affected me, I don't know. I don't know, I really don't know because I didn't take part in pop music, I was never able to respond to pop music.

AH: But you were interested in, you know, in mystic cults etc...

TH: Yes, but I was interested in the mystic cults in 1948.

AH: '48!

TH: Yes, I mean I began reading those texts of religious values at 14, 15, 16...

AH: You have on various occasions referred, to Shamanism, Sufism and Tibetan Buddhism, particularly The Tibetan Book of the Dead. You have reviewed Idries Shah's The Sufis and Eliade's Shamanism. In a poem in Wodwo you've mentioned the Cabala. Why are you interested in these mystic cults?

TH: Yes, well I was making... I was invited by a Chinese musician to make an oratorio of the Tibetan Book of the Dead in 1959, long before the swinging sixties had got going, and before that I knew the Bardo Thodol quite well. I mean I studied this at the University when I was 20. That whole popular interest in these things, Sufism and so on, that became general in the sixties, was just something that happened. They happened. It amazed me that all these people should be interested in things without my private curiosity. [Interruption].

Well, what were we talking about? I think I've more or less answered that.

AH: You were talking about the Chinese musician who met you in 1959.

TH: Yes, I was writing the script to produce the Bardo Thodol as a dance oratorio. But then I've been interested in Shamanism since I was seventeen or eighteen. I was surprised when all these became very popular in the sixties. When I first studied it, you couldn't buy these books, you could only find them in old libraries, they were very difficult to find. Then quite suddenly they were best sellers. In the sixties they became best sellers... yes, I was amazed. But... I kept separate from it, really, because I was... I didn't have carried on as I had before, but inevitably, as I say, you are...

The fact was that everybody was interested in these things mainly... that lots of people understood more or less what I was writing about, because a lot of that [was] what I had always been interested in. Inevitably, something of that was in what I wrote; and suddenly there was a generation that had some idea of what I was writing about, whereas the generation as far as of now, doesn't. They don't know anything of these things. Because all that world of interest in Sufis, in Eastern mysticism or primitive mysticism, has now again become the curiosity of the specialists. It's no longer the general sort of reading of the average student or even the reasonably literate student or even the student of literature. They are not interested in those things.

AH: No, my point is whether there is any influence in Wodwo, of, for instance, mysticism. You refer to the Cabala there.

TH: Yes, who knows, yes, presumably, presumably. I became very interested in the Cabala, long ago. These things inevitably appear in what you write, because they're what you think about.

AH: Please tell me something about your method of working in myths. You rework old

myths and often create new myths. Why do you find myths or the mythic method so useful for your poetic purpose?

TH: Well, I'm just interested in mythology... I'm just interested. I've always been interested in folklore, in ballads, that sort of thing. As soon as I read that sort of thing as I read novels, it just simply interests me and it's been always like that since I was a boy. And so in my writing, I suppose, I've seen ways of finding forms of expression out of my familiarity with that mythical world, with that world of story-making, that kind of metaphysics, as the kind of way my mind now works. I've been saturated in it so long, and I suppose, one could say, maybe, that kind of mythical style of things creeps occasionally into things I've written; but never deliberately, I've not particularly created the mythology or anything else of that sort.

And I don't particularly want to use mythology, you know, to take this myth and turn it into that work. If there's anything mythical and so on into what I write, I want it to be something that I just find in... out of my own psychology. And I really never give it, fit it back into any particular, previous, established, mythological, fake context. I don't want to do that, I don't want anybody to need to know some particular mythology before he can understand of what I'm talking about. So really I'm talking about mythical kind of idea, mythical kind of thinkers which I like, and so I suppose that appears there. But the actual use of different myths for that purpose is not the way I work.

AH: But do you find myths convenient for your purpose?

TH: Well, obviously, I make reference to those mythical types of figures...

AH: But they are your own creations?

TH: They are my own creations, yes. As soon as you start referring to other people's mythology you become merely... I suppose... you know, obviously one does that occasionally, because that's part of everybody's culture. I recently wrote a piece about a Jewish myth, a very precise, early myth about the demon goddess Lilith and the sister-goddess Mahomot. And that was a very specific story that provided a very specific image for something I wanted to write about a very specific situation. I didn't want to write about the myth, I wanted to use that myth just to give myself distance from a particular situation that I wanted to write about.

Well, that's an instance of using a specific old Hebrew myth, O.K.? That I'm not talking about the myth, I'm talking about the modern situation and merely using the myth to conceal the fact that it's a modern situation, and using it as a screen, not as a way of making a poem mythical. That was something that I could not have written about in immediate terms. And in that, in cases like that, maybe, you can use the art, mythical ideas or curiosity, as you might use the life of Pedro or you know, the death of Goethe as an idea, maybe as an image, as a mythical idea, use them simply as an image, what T.S. Eliot called an 'objective correlative', give you just an image, as the outline of a fable.

AH: What is your attitude to your contemporaries like Larkin, Gunn, Wain, Amis or the Movement poets?

TH: Well, they were really... we call them Movement poets, they were the last wave of the regular English poetry as it had been through the century before the sixties, before that wave of the sixties. And in a way that volume called the Movement³ was a sort of last stand, a defiant last stand to affirm the values represented in that collection, which are values of a fixed metric, a fixed and disciplined, traditional metric with tight rhyme, regular iambics, fixed verse forms and so on, and a sort of discursive, ironic treatment of the material. Understated, discursive, ironic, very rational, yes, very sober, very English. And there were very good poets among them.

But it was really the last moment before everything suddenly became very free for a few years, and then chaos entered the English Literature, it entered via American literature, via European literature, and then for ten-fifteen years, anything went. And then gradually those values, as I say, reasserted themselves. They reasserted themselves in slightly different forms, slightly freer forms really, slightly freer external forms, but in spirit they're the same; they're the same, of particular mood, and discursive, basically discursive. Maybe they replaced the kind of deliberate placing of imagery rather than a deliberate and ordered placing of argument, but basically the principle of rational restraint is the same.

AH: But you are completely different from them?

TH: Well, I am. I just... I suppose, I just absorbed all kinds of things wherever I felt that I could adjust it or I could use it or, you know, gave me something that I could make my own. And I don't feel particularly hostile to these poets. I like a lot in all. I'm a great admirer of Larkin, Thom Gunn. Gunn, I think, he's a wonderful poet.

AH: Gunn was often associated with you.

TH: Yes, he was, because we were in the University at the same time and we were both published by Faber and Faber at the same time... and we've always been friends; but our poetry is very different. But I do like his work very much, I like his mind.

AH: Who among the recent, younger poets do you think are close to the universe of your poetry? Who do you think are the most promising poets among the younger generation?

TH: That's very difficult to say. I make a rule of saying nothing about the younger or the living, if possible, nothing about the living. I've lived long enough to know that every remark you make about a living person makes enemies. I don't mind making enemies [laughs], but why make more than I already have?

AH: [Laughing] No, no, but they sometimes can make friends also.

TH: Yes they can make friends. But when you say he is a wonderful poet, everybody else feels insulted [laughs heartily].

AH: Right; so you would refrain from making any comment on this. But do you think your poetry has a therapeutic role to play in our contemporary materialistic-rationalistic society?

TH: I don't know whether it's any role to play at all, I don't have any thoughts about that.

AH: But you might have some purpose behind writing these poems?

TH: No, my purpose in writing poems is to satisfy that strange sort of impulse one has to write; what is that impulse I don't know. I certainly don't have any idea of writing for some purpose, or for some social purpose, not at all.

AH: No, it may not be any direct social purpose, but...

TH: Well, it's the same. If anybody finds any use in them, that's something else. But it's not any particular use that I put there.

AH: But don't you think that the materialistic-rationalistic situation is rather crippling our souls?

TH: Yes, I do, yes, yes, I would like to see the West completely injected by the East, I would like it... to see it completely suffused by the East. I think what the West needs is a lot of the spirit of the East. That's why I think during the sixties there was an enormous thirst for Eastern things. Because we know that the whole world, the whole spiritual world, on which the East still floats in many different ways and forms and so on... from extreme fundamentalism to philosophical mysticism... nevertheless, there is an easy acceptance throughout Eastern society that existence is based on spiritual things.

And in the West, you see, that's gone. And the misery and unhappiness of the West under its apparent prosperity is a misery that everybody lives in. It's a deep unhappiness that every individual Westerner lives in. And they know that no matter how much they have, they don't have the important thing which is to be happy, and they know what they are lacking is something, some sort of spiritual foundation. They know that they are lacking it because that's what human beings are, need; they know that they've been cut off from it. But they don't know how to find it. They do not find it in man. They don't want it in that religion, because that is too narrowing and dogmatic and crippling; they don't want it in that religion because that was too this, or that religion becomes too that. They want some invented new spiritual reality that hasn't been discovered. And so the whole thing is a search and search and search... . And they feel that it's there in the East, maybe, maybe, there's something to be learnt there, but they don't know what. Maybe they should bring it again, invent it again out of themselves, but they don't know how.

AH: What do you mean by this 'spirit of the East'?

TH: Well, I think it is that the Western society is basically materialist and Eastern society basically isn't materialist. Even though it's adopting very rapidly technology and science and so on, it's giving out its spiritual foundation with great reluctance. And maybe the East will find some way of making all these things live together. Why not? Why should science remove one's sense of spiritual existence? It shouldn't. There's no necessity for it. It's just... it's all a case of reinventing your idea of God, you know, because the old notion of the Christian God fizzled out and was discredited by science. They think that's gone, the whole thing... the whole thing disappeared with it.

AH: Can I ask one textual question, please? What is the idea of the first two poems of Crow? What do you wish suggest by these?

TH: The first two, where I talk about the 'Lineage'? Well, that's a kind of... that's just a sort of scanning cartoon.

AH: Cartoon!

TH: As far as I remember, yes, about that; just a way of locating, you know, the material, an early attempt to locate the material, nothing more than that.

AH: O.K. thank you. When are you leaving Bangladesh?

TH: Friday.

AH: Do you have any plan to come to India, to Calcutta?

TH: Yes. I do. But I don't know when. Let's see.

AH: I mean not immediately? Not in the near future?

TH: No, this is really an unusual amount of travel for me.

AH: No, I thought that since you are in Dhaka, and Calcutta is half an hour's journey from here, you may -

TH: No, I should have been back in London tonight.

AH: What are you writing at the moment? We have seen your What is the Truth? and nothing more after that.

TH: Well, they've published a book of mine this year.

AH: I haven't seen it yet.⁴

TH: Now what is the idea of What is the Truth? It is that in spite of the fact that everything on earth gets such a bad time, all the animals, all the birds and fish on earth have a difficult time from man, because he kills them, or he fights them, he enslaves them, he eats them... this is apart from the fact that they are killing them each other and eating as well, of course. Nevertheless, that doesn't alter the fact that they are all part of the great Creative Idea. And at the end of the story, God's Son, nevertheless, having heard what's happened to all the animals, walks down into the earth, into the world to join men where he will also be killed and eaten.

AH: And do you like to make any comment on River, particularly?

TH: No, nothing to say about that except that they're just poems about memories of rivers, you know, that I've [seen].

AH: Thank you very much, Mr. Hughes.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The Vacanas are devotional free-verse lyrics, composed in Kannada, one of the major South Indian languages, and not in Tamil.
2. Hughes perhaps refers to Speaking of Siva, an anthology of vacanas translated with an Introduction by A. K Ramanujan, (London: Penguin Books, 1973).
3. Perhaps Hughes had in mind New Lines, Robert Conquest, ed. (1956; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1962).
4. This book, Wolfwatching, became available for study soon after the interview.

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options.

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalCambridge Folder

Conversation with Hughes' Contemporaries

Transcript of a recording made at the International Ted Hughes Conference, Pembroke College, Cambridge University on Friday 17th September, 2010.

Chair: Colin Wilcockson. Panel: Daniel Huws, Richard Hollis, Carol Hughes.

CW: It's a rather hazardous business being on this particular symposium. Daniel Weissbort would have been on it but was not at all well and alas has had to leave for home. I am glad he read his poems yesterday evening. The other person we were originally going to have also on the committee was Terence McCaughey. Terence, who lives in Dublin, knew Ted probably better than anybody else, was an exact contemporary of his in Pembroke, and was very fond of him. And Terence is very upset

that his health over the last few months has made him feel it would be very unwise to make the journey. But fortunately, we have Terence by proxy. He wrote to me about a week ago, a letter which was very moving, saying how much he would miss not being here, but that he'd written down some memories of what he would have brought up about Ted. And we're very lucky that Carol will read this for us, and I think that will provoke a lot of questions to the other people who knew Ted well: Daniel Huws, who will answer you either in speech or in song; and Richard Hollis, who knows a lot about the artistic productions of Ted's works.

So we have brought a good mixture here, and I'm sorry I'm the only sort of odd man out. I could say I met Ted. Indeed, when he was awarded an honorary Doctorate by the University of Cambridge, I spoke to him on Pembroke lawn for, I should think, at least seven minutes! I had myself the fortune (but in this particular context, the misfortune) of going up at exactly the same time to university, but it was at a place which I will say, sotto voce, was called Merton College, Oxford. So, I don't know anything about anything useful to us this evening, as I'm pretty ignorant of the Cambridge scene at that time.

The other thing I will mention is that both Daniel Weissbort's memoir and Lucas Myers' memoir are both on sale here and those may well supplement the discussions we have this evening. About the absent Terence McCaughey: you can again have his presence, because in the photograph in the showcase at the far end there, he's shown in the centre, David Morton is on his left, Terence in the middle and Ted on the right. So that, again, when all this is finished and you want to know who was behind this memoir, you can see Terence in person.

The other thing I will mention, which of course would be near to Ted's heart, is that I noticed when I looked at the little paragraph about all the characters who are performing during this splendid conference, is that Daniel Huws and I were born in the same year. Now I'm damned sure I look younger and, in fact, I am right! Daniel is July and a Cancer, solidly in the middle of it. They're very quietly reliable people, Cancers. Me, I'm a little bit later, July 23rd, born on a cusp, very uncomfortable that is. So, I'm three-quarters a Leo and one quarter a Cancer. That, I think, accounts for the fact I'm never certain of anything about anything and I can never decide whether I'm actually neurotic or just hysterical!

Well, with that, let's start now and I'll ask Carol if she would kindly read Terence's memoirs.

READING OF TERENCE McCAUGHEY'S MEMOIR:

Ted and I met for the first time in Heffer's bookshop in Cambridge during what must have been our first or second week in Cambridge in Autumn of 1951.

Forty seven years later, our last meeting took place in Dublin in June 1998, and, while we spoke again, it was to be the final one in a sadly fitful and irregular series of encounters over nearly five decades. Indeed, it was perhaps testimony to the

relationship that notwithstanding the erratic nature of our meetings, they were marked by undiminished affection, still poignantly so on that last occasion just weeks before he died.

I cannot recall what particular books I was looking for that autumn day in 1951 but certainly my list included Sisam's Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose – also on the list of this stranger in the shop. He already had his sister's copy, but a version without the accompanying vocabulary. He proposed that since we both apparently belonged to the same college I should buy his copy and so allow him to buy the more expensive one – happily complete with vocabulary. We agreed on the bargain there and then. After whatever coming and going was involved we agreed to be supervised together for our first year under MJC Hodgart – an authority on the ballads and who was developing his interest in oral literature in general and James Joyce in particular at that period. The two of us felt encouraged to develop an interest in the words and music of street ballads not separate from our studies but as part and parcel of them. We also enjoyed singing them when the occasion demanded – even indeed when it did not...

Ted and I spent much of our time together during those years. In part, I think perhaps this was a response to coming from outside the public school environment – we were both, in a way, outsiders – me from Ireland and Ted from Yorkshire.

But it was not just that. We were fortunate to share so many interests – music, nature, poetry, language... In the evenings, for example, after Hall, we would often retire to either Ted's or my room and spend the evening reading poetry or listening to Beethoven on 78 rpm records. We would go to the cinema fairly regularly – Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton. I can remember many and varied things we did but just now I recall particularly vividly sitting in the dusk or darkness while Ted made owl noises to attract them to us... It was also during that first term that Ted introduced me to brown bread, cheese, and treacle sandwiches – proper north of England fare – and utterly delicious!

I should perhaps mention the visit to Cambridge of Ted's sister Olwyn. I hadn't of course met her before. We had tea together in a tea house near the Franciscan church and opposite The Eagle Pub. What really astonished me about the relationship between the two of them was the fact that they could and did speak of their friends in terms of their horoscopes. So that for instance they would say the relationship between so and so and so and so was doomed as they were horoscopically incompatible! This was a totally new way of looking at relationships to me!

Regretfully our contact over the immediately following years was more sporadic. This was due in no small way to my preoccupation with my own life in another country and my failure to be there for him. Ted, for his part, never missed an occasion to send Ohna and me copies of his latest collection, occasionally including messages scolding me for my poor efforts at keeping in touch.

I can only say, sadly, that I was aware of the terrible suffering of his whole situation but found it impossible to believe I could be of any real help to him.

Since his death I think of that last day we spent together in June 1998 and the final words that passed between us that afternoon. After lunch in Trinity and after a while sitting in the sun on the Dining Hall steps we split into two groups – Carol and Ohna to the town and Ted and myself on the Hopkin's Trail.

Unfortunately the upper floors of Newman House were closed for renovation and we were able to gain access only to the bottom of the stairs. Not to be defeated in our search for places associated with Hopkins we went next door to have a look at the University church, built as the church for the Catholic University at the instigation of Cardinal Newman. It was freshly done up and looking very well. Ted was silent for a minute or two, then he said, "This fairly closely persuades me to become a Catholic or a Christian" That was all. It was said so quietly – almost to himself.

The next place we stopped at was Glasnevin Cemetery and though we stopped at graves here and there our main focus of interest was the Jesuit plot where Gerard Manley Hopkins, along with scores of brother Jesuits, lies buried. The plot is a huge gravelly square with nothing whatever growing on it – grey and barren – "Were they so very noxious?" Ted wondered, "Does nothing at all grow here? Nothing at all?"

Each of the books we received from Ted over the course of those years, between finishing University and the June of 1998 contained something wonderful. And following his death, I have re-read many of them, each time finding something new and uplifting – none more so than the following, from *Tales from Ovid*... [The passage which was read was from the Introduction to *Ted Hughes: Tales from Ovid*, Faber, 1997, pages x and xi, beginning: "In his earlier books, preoccupied with erotic love, he (Ovid) had been a sophisticated entertainer."]

READING ENDS

CW: Thank you very much Carol

What I'll do now if I may is to ask Daniel and Richard just briefly to indicate to us the ways in which they knew Ted, how they first came across him, and in what way they worked or played together. So Daniel...

DH: Um. A good way to begin is with "Um" I am not going to start talking about Ted. I've written a memoir which is for sale, this is not a sales talk, it's simply that, although when you get older you do repeat yourself, consciously to repeat myself is something I have avoided all my life. So I can't possibly bring myself to start telling stories which are in that little book. So, I won't have a lot to say. But we have just heard about Terence. Terence I love, he's a marvellous person and Terence and Ted, above all, and a couple of their Pembroke friends, transformed my life in Cambridge. I was at a college over the road, Peterhouse, and met them by chance and I attached myself to Terence and Ted like a leech, from the middle of my second year on. And we had things in common. With Terence – I'm going to talk a bit more about Terence than Ted really – we've heard a lot about Ted – Terence, was very close. He was undoubtedly Ted's closest friend

throughout the Cambridge years. There's a photograph at the back with three young men, at the end of an evening I would guess – Ted with a moustache which I never saw. I was amazed to see he'd had a moustache at one point. And the very nice character in the middle is Terence. And as Terence said, they loved singing, they used to sing a lot, and I came to sing with them. That was a very strong bond for a long time, and Carol told me last night that Ted loved singing even in the eighties when the occasion arose. He had a very good voice, but Carol has no recording of Ted singing. It seems criminal. He had a very... well, you all know his reciting voice, but his singing voice was not the same, a light, beautiful voice. But there we are. I think it is proposed later that you will be free to ask questions. So although I'm not going to say any more about Ted now, I'll gladly try to answer questions if I am able to, and I am sure Richard will do the same.

But there's one thing I feel it incumbent upon me to say. We've been reminded more than once that Ted is not with us but, as Auden said of Yeats, "he lives now in his admirers" And that encapsulates that idea as neatly as can be done. I've joined his admirers for these very enjoyable few days, but I do have to say that the Ted I knew, who is still more alive in my mind than the Ted in the minds of most of you – that if Ted had been here, I was thinking what phrase would he have used, and there are many, and I thought one very likely one was "a parasitical orgy" or words to that effect. He would have had a multitude of phrases, he could have spun them out. But I think those of you who knew Ted would know that he appreciated people who took a close interest in his work – and I have to look no further than Keith to know someone who took a deep interest in Ted's work from a very early stage and Ted appreciated it highly, and you realise that from the wealth of letters written by Ted to Keith. So he appreciated that. But by-and-large academic works, literary criticism, were... I won't use any more words. So I met Ted in 1952 and got to know him much better the next year, and I knew him very well until my wife and I left London in 1961. Ted and Sylvia left in 1962, and from then on it was much more occasional. We used to come now and again down to Devon – but not very often. OK.

CW: Thank you very much. Richard, would you like to, as it were, locate yourself.

RH: In a sense I represent the missing people, because I was drawn into this circle of people from Cambridge – I am one of the very few people here who never went to University. I went to art school. And through the Cambridge connection though, I happened to be living above where Daniel Huws' father had a flat, and where Daniel Huws was also living and then Ted and Sylvia then came to live there. But also I'd like to say that because the people who knew Ted were running, in a way, to the end of their lives, that I thought it was very nice that what they knew of Ted should be remembered in publications. So, because of the new cheap ways of printing, I started – I'm not really a publisher, but I started having printed (because I'd been a book designer), printing first of all Dan Huws' memoir and also the book where Ted wrote an introduction to the poems of Susan Alliston, who was a friend of mine. And then Daniel Weissbort's, Ted Hughes and Translation, and Lucas Myers' – his memoir of Ted and Sylvia. Because I knew these people and was part of this circle, although not being a text person but

being an image person it was slightly strange, so I am in a way peripheral to it.

On the other hand I worked with Ted and Daniel Weissbort on Modern Poetry in Translation when it began, so was very involved for quite a long time with that and had some interesting meetings with Ted and Daniel and translators and so on. But my contribution can only be anecdotal and marginal, because I can't say that I knew Ted well, although I let him stay in the flat that I'd vacated. So it was an intermittent thing and through – when he had the thing on the South Bank – Poetry International – I can remember walking across the bridge with him and chatting. I didn't, of course, see them as... I knew they wrote things, but it wasn't the crucial thing. They were people for me. And Sylvia, who lived down below, you could sit while she was knitting something, and she was like a, more a housewife, who is just doing things. So I had a very different relationship to people who were writers and, as I say, I didn't know Ted well but really marginally. But anecdotally I can contribute.

CW: Thank you very much. I have a question. A few years ago a contemporary of Ted's at Pembroke who read English, Chris Wilson, sent me his diary. You may have seen it in the exhibition in the Library. And it's just a very simple, free, hand-out diary that Heffers gave to all students as a sort of advert for Heffers, the bookshop. And Ted had got hold of Chris's diary – he'd called on Chris one day, Chris wasn't in his room but his door was open, and he filled in at various dates things that apparently had happened to Chris: a completely weird and surreal story that started with Chris inadvertently having gone out to a restaurant that served dog. Chris's confession to his various friends in this diary brought totally different reactions – completely mad reactions – from parents, girlfriends and heaven-knows-what, and this kind of crazy, surreal humour, followed by a lot of very amusing sketches – a marvellous one of Beethoven, looking very, very serious, strumming away at the piano, and the bird in the cage has actually died – and I'd like to ask Daniel particularly, was Ted often funny? Had he got a great sense of humour and what sort of humour had he if he had one?

DH: Oh absolutely. The whole of Cambridge was regarded as a big joke.

CW: In general, or by him?

DH: Well by him and by us. It wasn't taken seriously. I don't know what was. You were allowed to sort of approve of certain people – Beethoven for example – OK, Beethoven was great, and Swift was great, Shakespeare of course – there were these great, great people, but Cambridge... most of the dons, almost all of the English (I wasn't in the English department, I used to hear all about them) they were not highly regarded with one or two exceptions. The students were by-and-large written off. They dressed in a way which seemed rather stereotyped, and talked in a way which seem rather stereotyped and their interests seemed rather stereotyped. It was probably very unfair, because I look – my favourite page in the newspapers these days is 'Obituaries' – and I read about these people and I say, "Good God, he was at Cambridge when I was there": people I had never heard of, never come across, but interesting people. They were here. But apart from the small group of friends... they were then sort of...

write-offs.

CW: And was there a public school/ grammar school tension? I haven't found it in anything from Ted, but you may have.

DH: It was undoubtedly there. Yes. Ted and Terence's circle, which I joined, and later it sort of expanded and people from other colleges, Christ's and Trinity, one or two other people were drawn in after Ted's immediate contemporaries had left. But a common factor was, I think, that none of them – (apart from me, I was a sort of Public school – because for four years I had been to Public school, but I'd been at a State School in Wales before that, and I felt an outsider at the school I went to. And Terence had been to Campbell College [Belfast] – is that a private school? I think it is. Terence had been there)... Terence, incidentally – you heard his piece – he is a Protestant, a Presbyterian. What else? A Republican. And he took part in the early Civil Rights protests in Northern Ireland, and received death threats, and this is just a bit of Terence's background. He moved down to Dublin and has lived there ever since – but that was Terence... Why did I start saying that, I've forgotten?

CW: Well I'm interested that he was at Campbell, because it is indeed a Public school. And Chris...

DH: [Remembering his theme] Ah the social business. There was, you know, you saw someone coming towards you in grey flannel trousers and a blazer, and you walked past them, you knew they were from different –

CW: [interrupting] Were they wearing ties?

DH: And ties, yes, but almost everyone wore ties. Almost everyone wore ties. Even I wore ties quite often. But there were unspoken social divides, which you recognised.

RH: [interrupting] I ought to point out that in Lucas Myers' memoir, Daniel Huws is going about with boots tied up with wire, which gives you an idea of his conventions.

DH: That's fiction.

CW: I was at Oxford at exactly the same time and I don't think anyone ever even knew what school you were at, so, at that time...

DH: I don't know. You didn't know what school they'd been to. You knew what sort of school they'd been to.

CW: Ah, I see.

[It was remarked that Ted hated blazers for almost the rest of his life]

DH: And so did I. Ted did wear grey flannel trousers. But they were only... Ted would...

I think his wardrobe was very meagre. He had grey flannel trousers and he had this black jacket which he wore for years. Corduroy. Which he passed on to me, actually.

CW: Yes, as in the photograph on this [indicates a photograph of Ted, in black jacket and moustached, on the cover of the conference folder].

DH: He wore that. He probably must have had a suit. And he probably had another jacket, and then someone mentioned, in one of the talks, the First World War leather coat. It was a leather coat, issued to men in the trenches, and leather was relatively waterproof and normal, I suppose, in the First World War, and he wore this. It was very faded and scuffed, and he wore that when the weather demanded a coat – a scuffed leather coat.

[Dan Huws was asked whether, at Cambridge, Ted ever had long hair which he used to tie back]

DH: He never had a pony tail. His hair was generally long, yes. And it was still long, as we saw in the film last night [Noel Chanan's video: Leonard Baskin and Ted Hughes in Conversation 1983. Chanan, 2009], he was still long haired. It was long before long hair became fashionable.

CW: Some questions.

KS [Keith Sagar]: I was only one year behind Ted and that was at King's, so it was very much the same Cambridge. I never met him until 1970, many years later, but I told him one day that I remembered him from Cambridge, because he was such a conspicuous figure in the lecture theatre. Everybody else wore blazers, or sports coats, duffle jackets, and I said "You were twice as big as anybody else, you wore a burgundy coloured cord jacket, you always took an aisle seat because there wasn't room for your legs, and sprawled you legs out into the aisle, and you always looked completely bored" He said, "Oh no, that wasn't me, that was Karl Miller"

DH: A burgundy coloured jacket sounds more like Karl Miller than Ted. I don't remember the burgundy coloured one – he may have had one in his early years. There's a question...

CW: Terrence [Terry Gifford]

TG: I may have asked this before. Did Ted come to Cambridge a singer or did he learn songs at Cambridge, and where did these songs come from? How did he learn them? And what kind of songs did you [Daniel Huws] bring to Cambridge? Perhaps you could give us an example.

DH: I will, because I promised Carol to sing at least one song, which was a great favourite of Ted's, before the end of the evening. So, be patient. Ted – I got to know Ted when I was in my second year and he was in his third, and by that time, Ted,

Terence, they're named in the memoir, they were all Pembroke people. They probably knew a lot of people in other colleges but they stuck together throughout their three years and they would go down to The Anchor. Most evenings they'd sort of meet there between six and seven, exchange the day's news, and so on. Then after Hall, after dinner in the evening, if there was nothing better to do, if there was no film or play, they'd often go back there and then on those evenings we'd usually end up singing. The great source of songs? The repertoire was probably three-quarters Irish, and Terence was the source. Terence knew lots of songs, so there were street ballads. I think they were encouraged by Matthew Hodgart, who was their tutor, and one of the few dons the students felt at ease with, I think. I didn't know him well but I met him once or twice, and his great interests were, as Terence said, ballads. He wrote a small book about ballads. And James Joyce, which of course was, in those days, whether you read James Joyce or not, you had to be interested in him. And so Terence knew a lot of songs, many of them I later realised probably came from Colm O'Lochlainn's collection of Irish Street ballads [Irish Street Ballads, Dublin, 1939]. But they're very widespread. Some were not from there. Some I still haven't seen in print. Terence had a big repertoire, Green and Orange – mostly Green but a few Orange songs. And I remember one evening we were singing in the pub and a couple of Irish labourers came in and they sat in the corner and listened. And one of them came over after half an hour and he said "What fuckin' side are you on?" So, Terence was an Orangeman, you see, but in spirit he was more Green. I'll sing one song that Terence...

CW: [interrupting] This doesn't let you off at the end you know!

DH: No, No. I'll sing the one that I promised Carol. But talking of this Green and Orange reminds me of a song which Terence sang. I haven't seen all of the form he sang in print. So that was the staple. Irish songs really. There was a small element of Music Hall. There was a man called Brian Roberts. I don't know what became of him, he was at Pembroke, he had one or two Music Hall songs; and Roger Owen, who was also a friend, and became a BBC man; and Ted – he had a couple of Yorkshire songs which he never sang often enough for me to learn them. I don't know them. His great... his big songs, and because they were big songs they couldn't be sung early in the evening, so at about half-past-ten (pubs closed officially at 11 in those days. You were kicked out) it was, "Come on Ted, it's time. We want 'Sir Patrick Spens'" And we'd get 'Sir Patrick Spens'. And his other big ballad was 'Eppie Morrie', which is about the abduction of a girl – or an attempted abduction. It's a great song for women, because she wrestles with a man all night and she emerges a virgin. And the maid comes in in the morning and says "Shame on you!" to the man. It's a long one. I can sing most of it but I'd need a few pints before I'd take on that. So those were his two big songs. So it's basically Irish songs. And then, after that year when I got to know them, there was a man from Christ's (no he was at Queens', he had a friend at Christ's) called Colin White, who was a Scotsman, a very fiery Scotsman, a lovely man, he died quite recently. And he used to go up in Summer – he worked, when they were building Dounray, the atomic power station – and he used to go as a labourer to earn money and live in a bothy with all the navvies, and he had a very good stock of bothy songs. So those were the sources. Such songs as I knew, which no one else knew, they were Welsh. So now and again I'd

sing a Welsh song, as a sort of a bit of decoration.

CW: Are you giving us a sample now?

DH: Of a Welsh song?

CW: Well, yes.

DH: No. Is it time for a song already? [Aside in Welsh to CW, who understands Welsh]
Give me a drink.

Right, I will sing one song then we can talk a bit more. I'll sing a song of Terence's which is quite an easy one to sing, which is 'Brian O'Lynn'. Which I'm sure lots of you know versions of 'Brian O'Lynn'. I just have to remember how the beginning... just get a reasonable note:

SINGING:

Brian O'Lynn to his house had no door,
He'd the sky for a ceiling, the earth for a floor,
He'd a way to jump out and a way to jump in,
"Tis a fine habitation", says Brian O'Lynn.

Brian O'Lynn went a courting one night,
But he set both mother and daughter to fight,
To fight for his hand they both stripped to the skin,
"Ach I'll marry ye both," says Brian O'Lynn.

Brian O'Lynn and his wife and wife's mother,
They all went over the bridge together,
The bridge broke down and they all tumbled in,
"Ach I'll go home by water," says Brian O'Lynn.

Oh Brian O'Lynn was an Orangeman born,
But he married a Papist from this side of Mourne,
"Ach I will wear Orange and she will wear Green,
And we'll keep out of trouble," says Brian O'Lynn.

Brian O'Lynn went to Chapel one day,
But he had no beads so he'd damn all to say,
The priest comes up to him, says, "What is your sin?",
"Ach I have no apparatus," says Brian O'Lynn.

CW: That's wonderful, thank you. Right. [To questioner] Yes?

Q: Plenty of women in the songs but a real woman hasn't been mentioned yet. Was that

the tenor of the Cambridge experience? Was it wholly masculine?

DH: Almost totally masculine, yes. We talked about women. We'd see them in shops and walking along the street, and in lectures. There were the women of Girton and Newnham, and New Hall, which had just opened. There were only about fifteen in New Hall, it's a tiny College [now known as 'Murray Edwards College']. And of those, they were mostly chosen for academic achievement, you didn't see them much except in lectures. So there were these very glamorous – the glamorous few who acted and were public figures. Well, they were a bit like film stars, you know, you knew some of them by sight. But hardly anyone had girl-friends. If they had girl-friends they were in London or, apart from Girton and Newnham, there was Homerton College, which was a teachers' training college, there were girls there, and Addenbrooke's Hospital – a lot of nurses. That was it. So it was a strange life, looking back and young people today would... Like a monastery.

Q: I went to university twenty years later and I can't remember much other than girls.

CW:. Well, on that note of confessional – What about some questions about the arts.

KS: Can I say this about girls –

CW: You had an ample supply?

KS: There's a photograph in the case there of Ted at a May Ball, with a girl, obviously. I went to a great deal of trouble to try and identify that girl, and I have here a letter from Claas [Kazzer]. Where is he? [To Claas] You didn't put a date on it unfortunately. The first bit is very personal information about yourself, so I'll leave that out.

READING:

The remainder of my trip continued as fruitfully as the first week had been, and the meetings with Edna Wholey...

KS:[Aside]Is that how they pronounce it?

KS:[reading] ... and Olwyn were very enlightening. I sat down and went through my recording locating and transcribing the bit about the picture you asked me to show to Edna. I thought it might be a picture of Edna Wholey herself. Edna, her husband (John, I believe [Joe]) and I, had been sitting in the living room talking about and looking at pictures she had, when I produced your photo', telling her that you had this but didn't know who the young lady was. Edna looked at it, took a deep breath, paused. I wasn't altogether sure whether the photo' brought on a pleasurable memory or not. After maybe half a minute, she smiled and began:

Edna: "Ted came to ask if I could go to the May Ball" </p>

Husband: "When he was at Cambridge University, they have a Ball"

Edna: "In the first year"

Husband: "May Ball it's called. It's usually in June. It's called the May Ball."

Edna: "My permission was refused. A visiting – the family name was Alpino. They were Italians."

Husband: "That's right"

Edna: "Italians who came over after the war. They were – "

Husband: "... Sort of restaurateurs"

Edna: "They were restaurateurs and Tony Alpino was an actor. This is his niece. Her name begins with a 'C' – That's a photograph of Ted looking very apprehensive. He's looking very 'Well – 'I don't know if I'm doing the right thing'. Carina – Ca – was it Carina? Her name was Carina. Her name was not Alpino. She was of the Alpino family but her mother had married an Englishman. She was visiting us, and he was so disappointed. He'd come to ask if I could go – And so he just turned round and asked her. He'd never met her before. And her family were very Italian. They all went into a huddle. So they booked a hotel room. They booked a hotel room for her and her uncle. Tony took her on the train to go to Cambridge, and they were at Cambridge the following morning to bring her home"

Husband: "Very proper."

Edna: "I don't suppose the poor girl went to bed before five in the morning"

Husband: "Ted's eyes are saying: 'I did never believe this'. He truly thought this: 'What about this in the Yorkshire Post?'"

Edna: "He's looking very wary of it. Not at all happy about the situation. This is Carina, there"

Claas: I asked which age she was then. Nineteen?

Edna: "Well, just as he went to university – yes, nineteen."

Husband: "Should be about his first May Ball, I should think."

READING ENDS

There you are.

DH: The value of research! If you'd asked me, I'd say it was a needle in a haystack, but there you are. If you're persistent in a scholarly way you dig up the truth.

CW: You had a question?

Q: Yes, I did. I know Daniel [Weissbort] isn't here tonight, which is really sad – It was touched on – Modern Poetry in Translation – and of course one of the things which has been mentioned rather obliquely is the breadth of Ted's European sympathies. I mean European all the way through to, well Amichai was mentioned, Janos Pilinzski, Vasco Popa – people that he was championing. Even for schoolchildren to read, back in the early nineteen-sixties. And this strikes me as – when you think of 'The Movement' going – it's a Little England. Was that something that you noticed in Ted? That early on – a breadth of interests?

DH: No. Richard may tell you more about that.

RH: He was very internationalist in outlook. I think, well from what Daniel Weissbort says, it was really being invited to the Spoleto Festival, when he met people like Vasco Popa, that gave him the incentive. He suddenly realized that he'd been handed sheets which were literal translations, or crude translations, just to give people an idea of the content of the poem. And he thought really, with somebody speaking in the original language and having this literal translation, that was enough. But I think his whole outlook was actually very – you know, "Poetry isn't just for England. And other people's poetry is also ours" And of course poets, some English poets, were very hostile to this notion, saying that it is impossible to translate and bring anything of the original. So he met with a great deal of resistance.

And the way that, with the first issue of Modern Poetry in Translation he was very – I quite by chance had been in Latin America, where the notion was that you could just hand out poems in the street, and it was free. So the first Modern Poetry International [Modern Poetry in Translation] was printed on this airmail paper, with the idea that it could be sent for very little money. That's why it was on light paper, because the cost of sending things was dependent upon their weight. But we did it on this very light paper, and it also at the same time looked throwaway. So it was that kind of idea that poetry is for everyone.

It's an aspect of Ted that I think is very much forgotten. That he was not in the least, well you know this, ivory tower. It was his involvement with the environment and environmental issues; and helping his friend, his Cambridge friend, David Ross, who helped found the St Botolph's Review (with the money for it) and also started a magazine which Ted gave his backing to. His actual mental horizons were vast. It's very extraordinary that he had not only this extraordinary memory but that his interests were so vast.

And also, I think, that the sort of thing that is forgotten, is that he was actually also a very humorous. Apart from being a very generous person in this way, he was also very

humorous, and there was a lot of fun actually in doing Modern Poetry in Translation. As I was telling Daniel [Huws] earlier, there was a meeting with Daniel Weissbort when we were discussing a Yehuda Amichai translation, not made by Ted but made by an Israeli who was there. Well, Ted said: "You know, the original poem has forty-five stanzas and you've only got thirteen?" And the man said: "I make a new creative entity" And Ted was absolutely folding up with – roaring with laughter – holding up a copy of the old modern translation.

The other thing is also the retiring from public interest in a way. Because I was involved with a book done by Sebastian Barker, the photographer George Barker's son. There were photographs of poets with one of their poems. And, in a way, because I had known Ted, I was the person who was to ask him to – "please will you bloody well be photographed" – with one of these huge cameras. And Ted would not agree to be photographed. Only by trickery could he be inveigled out of Olwyn's house. And he was standing in front of some railings, where he'd emerged very startled-looking in the morning, and Sebastian Barker, who had a very grand camera, had to take only a miniature camera to take a photograph of Ted and quickly grab his image. And there in this book of beautifully printed photographs is the one of Ted, and the poem is the 'Tiger', so it looks as though he is almost behind the railings and looking startled [The book is Christopher Barker, Portraits of Poets, ed. Christopher Barker, Carcanet, Manchester, 1986. Richard Hollis has since written that the poem (on p.24) is 'Famous Poet' (THCP 23). It begins: "Stare at the monster – "]. And it is the only one which is not really in focus or sharp. But that gives some idea that he didn't actually enjoy being, I don't think, being a public figure or being, I shouldn't say this, the subject of –

[One of the panel commented that Ted was livid and defiant when he heard that a photographer was waiting outside Olwyn's house to take his photograph, and that's what shows.]

RH: Exactly! But it's good. Well this was something which I found out. Because the only other person was William Golding, not that he was a poet, but in other Faber circumstances – these were the people who – As a non-writer, I admired the people who were slightly protective of what they wrote.

CW: [Indicating the photograph of Ted on the front of the Conference folder] That one's with railings, too. Who took that, do we know?

RH: It's a motif.

[The photograph is in the archive of Gerald Hughes, Ted's older brother, at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, and was probably taken by him when Ted first went up to Cambridge. One of the panel commented that there is a belief in some cultures that to have your image taken is like stealing your soul.]

CW and RH: Yes.

Q: Australian aborigines. You just mentioned something really fascination about the notion of being a public person – you said he disliked that. And yet, how did he feel about the opportunities that gave him? That was the impression that I got from him, that he didn't want to be –

RH: I don't know. Carol would have to –

Q: – a public person, but the possibilities to further his work. You were talking about wide interests – that sort of generosity – the encouragement of children. The engagement with the environment –

RH: Absolutely!

Q: That must have been a real conflict for him.

RH: I don't know how he had the time to do all the things that he did. Incredibly generous that he would – I mean with the letter writing – And if people needed some support for something he seemed to be willing to give it. He was under extraordinary – apart from the writing. He was very extraordinary.

DH: I think it developed slowly. When he was at Cambridge, as is well chronicled, he never sent a poem to any proper magazine for money the whole time, before Sylvia appeared. And then Sylvia took him in hand and within the year he was famous. Of course there were the gifts, but he himself hadn't promoted himself one inch: he had done nothing to promote himself up to that point. Promoting himself, I think, throughout his life, was against the grain, but he had these very firm, original ideas from an early age, and they developed: Poetry in Translation was one. I don't know – When was the Spoleto Festival, early sixties was it? Sixty three or thereabouts?

RH: Yes, early sixties.

DH: Before then he wasn't – When he came back from America, for example, he'd made discoveries (I hadn't seen him for two or three years) and he was full of some new writers but not – but all in English, still all English writers. But then, he discovered rather suddenly this marvelous, mostly East European, poetry. And even in the handouts, which were not done by professional translators, Ted, with his eye for what a poem was really about, saw instantly what it was. And from that MPT, which began in 1965 was it?

RH: Yes, that was the first issue.

DH: And that was also the year of the big thing in London.

CH: Yes, the festival [the International Poetry Festival].

DH: So that – He had this vision and he wanted everyone to share this vision and to understand these things. And so he took that on board and then, a few years later, Your

Environment, he encouraged David Ross to start that [Your Environment, London, 1970. David Ross and Walter C. Patterson are listed in the editorial details of the magazine as Editors, and Daniel Weissbort and Ted Hughes as Advisory Editors. See also, Daniel Weissbort's note in Ted Hughes and Translations, Hollis, 2010. p.18]. And one thing after another. And the Poet Laureateship was just one in a succession of things which, if you like to look on it as shamanic (which is a word which is used in relation to Ted, I think isn't a very easy but not misleading word to use of Ted), in accepting that, an office or post or whatever you call it which he must have known from the start would bring a lot of ridicule and mockery. Children's poetry in this case – it was probably the beginning. By then he knew it was possible, by embracing these sorts of public channels, to influence children and to influence the whole world of poetry. Which it did.

CW: I rather get the impression that he wrote a lot of poetry at school. We know that, and we know that a sheaf of his poems was sent to Pembroke when he did the scholarship exam. That wouldn't have got him the award that he got, because that would have to be on the written papers. So any sort of talk – the myth, I think, that grew up later (that Ted was perfectly happy to tell because it sounds a very romantic myth) that he was accepted at Pembroke as a dark horse. He got an Exhibition, which you can only get by taking the scholarship exams. Had he been a dubious entry – “Shall we? Shan't we?” – not getting an award – then the poems would have made a big difference probably. Unfortunately, although his file records that the poems were indeed sent, it also (there's a letter in the file from one of his teachers who thinks that perhaps on reflection they shouldn't have sent them. I suppose because it felt as if perhaps this was working outside the strict system. I don't know), unfortunately, the poems aren't there. Nor, in the file, is any response to the poems. So we don't know, in fact, what Matthew Hodgart or whoever read these, actually thought of them. But I do get the feeling – but am I wrong here? – that he wrote a lot of poems at school and he was very encouraged by his English teachers – one male and one female – both of whom he much admired, and who supported him, then for his two years of reading English he was not poetically productive. But is that wrong? I don't find any record of anyone talking about his poems as an undergraduate.

MW [Mark Wormald]: I don't want to forestall any contributions from the people who know, but I think it's important to say that Charles Ryskamp who visited Pembroke last summer, told me at some length and with much fondness, about Ted's visits to his room (Charles' room on M staircase) quite late at night after Ted may have come back from the pub, and Ted would scribble poems furiously.

CW: What year was that?

MW: That would have been, I think, 1953. Charles said that he had very vivid memories of Ted writing copiously, writing poems, then saying, “This is not good”, scrumpling it up, chucking it in the bin.

CW: Right.

MW: And I was struck at the time that this was evidence of Ted being a very committed writer, drafter, of poetry as an undergraduate.

CW: It had just gone through my mind, but I think that resolves that one. But I've quite often heard from students, that reading English can be killing to your creative ability. That every time you set pen to paper, you think, "Oh my God, this isn't as good as Keats, or whatever", and you pack it up. And it can be undermining, but you think that wasn't so?

MW: Not least because Charles would have been very keen to come to the conference, I think that it's just important to have this of his memory.

Q: Was this after the experience of the charred fox? The story that is very well known -

MW: Charles wasn't clear about that I'm afraid.

Q: – the idea that reading English – it seemed to be using the same part of the – the same batteries –

CW: There's a wonderfully gothic story, it's probably an allegory, I guess, because there was a subsequent vision when the fox nods approvingly. Normally one's dreams aren't – my dreams aren't as logical as this. Nor do I get the "Do watch this next week, kind of thing" In his year, as it happens (about the fox story I don't know anything) there were eight undergraduates in his year, four of whom switched to different subjects in their third year. So it was not at all a maverick kind of move. It was very very common. But it may be, nevertheless, that he found that reading English, and the rather stringent conditions, and the expectations of the sort of essays you are meant to write, became increasingly unsatisfactory to him.

Q: More importantly, he was beginning to write things and to recognise where the material lay that he needed.

KS: He published only two poems as an undergraduate. Both right at the end. The first was 'The Little Boys and the Seasons', in June 54, in Granta, under the pseudonym of Daniel Hearing. And about the same time, in Chequer, 'Song of the Sorry Lovers', under the pseudonym of Peter Crew.

DH: So that's a Daniel who didn't hear the first time. Perhaps I didn't even read that. I can't remember reading it published by Granta. But the second one of those was when the first poem I published, a rotten poem, was in that same issue. And we met that evening in The Anchor, we happened to be the only two there at that time, and he pulled out this copy of Chequer and he said "What do you think of this?" It was this poem by Peter Crew. And I think I passed. I haven't a clue what I said. He didn't show displeasure anyway and said "I wrote it".

CW: Neil [Roberts] did you have a question?

NR: Yes. Well no just a statement. I think that it is said in the interview he did in The Paris Review later on, that when he was at Cambridge he was writing all the time but what he wrote was complete confusion. It wasn't that he wasn't writing, just that he was dissatisfied.

DH: That's my impression. In retrospect, I'm sure that's right. Cambridge was a shock to him and this completely new attitude to literature which he encountered in the lecture theatres threw him off course.

CW: Terry [Gifford]?

TG: Brian Cox has a memoir – Professor Brian Cox was at Pembroke and was I think a post-graduate student when Ted was an undergraduate, and he has published a memoir (he's dead now), he published a memoir about Ted in Pembroke. He makes the point that his own creativity, which had begun at Grammar School, was crushed by the English Tripos at Cambridge. As I think you make that point, don't you Keith? Were you writing poems before you came to Cambridge?

KS: I published one or two poems in the school magazine and one in my first term at Cambridge. Sixteen years before I wrote another.

CW: It sounds as if it was the kiss of death to creativity, coming to Cambridge. We've time, say, for two more questions.

MW: Can I ask Richard to say a bit more about life in Rugby Street?

RH: There's not a great deal to say about it, because I suppose it was when Ted and Sylvia had come back from America and they were staying there. I've been in the house recently and it's a very –

DH: That was '59 was that?

RH: When? What date?

DH: No, '56 they left. That's when they first came together. They lived there on and off, because they met there in '56. I mean they slept together for the first time there in '56.

RH: It's very well described in Lucas Myers' memoir, exactly when everything happened. And I think the house is described, which actually today is not dissimilar, although they've built another floor on the top. Because quite by chance, when Jim Downer for whom Ted rewrote the verses to the children's book which was published about a year ago [Downer and Hughes, Timmy the Tug, Thames & Hudson, 2009], we were able then to go into where Jim Downer (who wrote the book) had the same floor as I did, which was above where Ted and Sylvia were, which was Daniel Huws' father's

flat really. It was just very primitive. There was still some gas lighting. There was only – the lavatory was in the basement in the area under the pavement for the whole house. There was one cold-water tap on the stairs. It was very primitive. And I asked Daniel today, “How did we manage? How did you get – as my wife said to me – well how did you get water to fill a kettle?” And I was reminded that you just had a big jug, which you filled at this tap halfway down the house and you took it back up again. And then occasionally you went to public baths. It was very –

Q: It wasn't that long since rationing had finished from the Second World War, was it?

RH: That's right. The interesting thing that I discovered after Jim Downer's book was launched – I thought this house is so interesting. I then went to the public library and enquired about the building next door, which turns out to have been a Rationalist Church. Where some famous speeches were given at the end of the nineteenth century and before the First World War, but where instead of having saints, they had Shakespeare, Goethe – and it's completely extraordinary –

DH: Followers of Le Comte [Auguste Comte 1798-1857] weren't they?

RH: Yes, followers of Auguste Comte, yes. It was a Positivist Church, I should have said. Very remarkable – because I think in the Birthday Letters poem about 18 Rugby Street Ted says something about there being something extremely strange about this house, because there seemed to have been so many extraordinary events. And the way it was described by Jim Downer, having Jacques Tati and Peter O'Toole and all these extraordinary visitors. And the woman who – when the house was full of gas one day, the woman on the ground floor – Was it the ground floor or the basement?

DH: Ground floor.

RH: It was in the basement. Her boyfriend –

DH: One Sunday morning – this terrible smell of gas. Gassed herself.

RH: So we knew there was something –

DH: Someone mentioned in one of the lectures (Richard wasn't here), someone said that on the eve of the publication of Birthday Letters Ted was full of this terrible anxiety – were there going to be terrible headlines the next day or whatever; and he even worried about – was there going to be a law suit by the motor mechanic in 18 Rugby Street. The motor mechanic in 18 Rugby Street, I can name him, he's probably dead, he's called Bill Bush, and he had a mistress and she lived on the ground floor. He lived somewhere in South London. And he ran some sort of dubious business in spare parts for motor cars and stored them in the basement. And Helen, his mistress, she was a nice sort of dark, buxom woman, who must have been about thirty, and she gassed herself one Sunday morning. There were rather dreadful events on the ground floor and first floor. Not on the second floor where Ted and Sylvia met. So there were no

particular bad omens on that floor. If there were, Ted would have dragged them out. And the top floor again, the man who lived there – he was an architect – he drowned a year or two before Richard arrived – in his own yacht.

CW: Carol, could I ask you – Did Ted reminisce much about Cambridge or was it “the past and that’s finished”? Was he a reminiscer?

[CH recalled that Ted would reminisce in the company of friends and they would also sing].

CW: Bit of reliving was it? Well if there is one more, and I hope there is, one more question to someone on the panel and then we’ll end with Daniel’s final song. Could I have a question? Ask me something, it makes me feel loved!! Ah!

Q: I am really struck by how vividly these memories are conveyed to us. I can barely remember the day before yesterday even and I certainly could not remember when I was eighteen or nineteen. I’ve completely repressed that, as I’m sure many of you have –

TG: Do Tell!

Q: I wonder whether you in fact have particularly acute memories and/or whether this was such a crucial, formative time that it can’t be forgotten. Whether you can’t have Ted Hughes without this period. How important were these few years to what was to follow? I’m really interested in the status of how you remember things so well.

CW: I think what is amazing, actually, just in general, is that those three years at university are so compressed that they do make an enormous impression. I’ve always been amazed. I met just only this evening a young woman whom I’d accepted here (I was admissions tutor for many years) and she knew word for word every question I’d asked her in the interview. Thank God, most of it sounded almost cogent. But sometimes I think, at a time like that, where you’re living it very intensely – Would you say (this is to ask what sounds like an aggressive question) how much are your memories – do they become – do you suspect, even yourself – might become a bit embellished? I’m putting it in an aggressive way just to spark it off.

RH: Well certainly mine are so minimal that there’s nothing to embellish.

CW: I suspect, but this is heresy, that like the story of the fox, there’s an element of embellishment that has gone on there in Ted’s mind. And Diane Middlebrook does say that each time he told the story over the years detail was added, and it wasn’t always the same. Mind you, that may be because the people recounting the story back again had misunderstood or added or subtracted. But how reliable do you feel your memory is?

DH: Your past is really valueless except for the stories, and so the stories – you cherish

them, you – I don't think 'embellish' is the word – but you sort of –

CW: Tidy up.

DH: – tidy up and –

Q: I don't think my point is that anyone was embellishing at all. I am really struck by Daniel – Keith says something and it sparks something new. I don't have the impression... I wouldn't want anyone to think that I implied anyone was embellishing. I really don't get that impression. It's just seems that in a long and enormously productive life these few years seem to be – from your representations of them really, really, really fundamental. And I'm wondering if you talk about now, as much as your own –

DH: It's a little bit like – It's a common observation that soldiers who have been in the real war, even if for a couple of years, those couple of years (like First World War soldiers) those couple of years they emotionally – they carry more weight than anything else, even their love and marriages, in their lives. And I'm not saying that Cambridge in the 1950s was like the First World War trenches but it was a bit more intense and to many of us it was completely novel. And so I suppose you do remember better.

RH: But what is significant about the memoirs is that they all corroborate each other. There's no disparity in information, even anecdotally. It's interesting.

CW: Did - I'm sorry I'm talking again – did he ever mention his service in the RAF? His two years National Service?

DH: Oh a little bit in a sort of way. He was a radar mechanic.

CW: It didn't seem to make a vast impression on him.

DH: Oh no, no. I did National Service. It didn't make a vast impression. In contrast to many, I think most people who did it, they grumbled. I found it immensely valuable. I went from a Public school and I had a place in Cambridge at the end of it. And you were thrown into this world. I did maths and science, so I became a technician – I repaired electronic stabilizers on Centurion tanks, that was my expertise – that's by the way. But suddenly you met people of your own age from every town in Britain more or less, at that time I could do a dozen different accents – Geordie, Glasgow, Scouse. I could do them. And it was marvellous. They were interesting people. I didn't become an officer. A lot of people became officers and they were deprived of this education – they were deprived of the other ranks. You had a day – 8 till 4 o'clock – and then you were free. And there was bugger all to do except read. And so I read a fantastic amount in those years. I'm sure Ted did.

RH: It's significant that when Ted was in the RAF the Korean War was going on. So actually if he'd been in the army this might have been very different.

DH: Well our friend Colin White, he was in Korea. He had one very good Korean War song: 'We're a shower of bastards' – it's an Australian song.

[CH supported the view, from her own experience, that group memories are honest.]

CW: Well time's going on. I think it's time for our climactic song. Thank you all very much for asking such interesting questions. I've learnt an enormous amount and I hope you feel you have, too. The whole feel of what it was like to be at Cambridge at the time. And I now turn to Daniel for the Finale.

DH: Carol suggested this song. I love it and Ted loved it. He mentioned it somewhere in Birthday Letters. It's called 'The Brown and the Yellow Ale' and it's an Irish song. The original song is in Irish and the version which I sing, which is in English, I believe the words are a translation by James Stevens. We didn't sing this in Cambridge. We didn't know it in Cambridge. We learned it in Rugby Street probably in 1956. I'm not sure of the year but I guess it was in 1956. There was a BBC programme – a half hour programme I think, about James Joyce and music and James Joyce's favourite songs, and we listened to this. And I can notate music – it's a fairly simple tune. We listened to the whole programme, I forget what the other songs were. This one was completely new and seemed rather marvellous. And they repeated the programme a few days later at a different time. And we'd half got the tune so when it was repeated we scribbled down the words and what I sing is what we got. Which mayn't be quite like the original singer. I can't say, because I've never reheard that record. It probably exists somewhere. It's a song called 'The Brown and the Yellow Ale', and the subject matter appealed very much to Ted and to me:

SINGING:

I was walking the road one fine day,
Oh the brown and the yellow ale,
When I met with a man who was no right man,
Oh, oh, love of my heart!

And he asked if the woman with me was my daughter,
Oh the brown and the yellow ale,
And I said she was my married wife.
Oh, oh, love of my heart!

And he asked would I lend her for an hour-and-a-quarter
Oh the brown and the yellow ale
And I said I would do anything that was fair.
Oh, oh, love of my heart!

So you take the high road and I'll take the lower,
Oh the brown and the yellow ale,
And we'll meet again by the ford of the river.
Oh, oh, love of my heart!

I was waiting there for a day and a quarter,
Oh the brown and the yellow ale,
And she came to me without any shame.
Oh, oh, love of my heart!

When I heard her tale I lay down and I died,
Oh the brown and the yellow ale,
And she sent two men to the wood for timber.
Oh, oh, love of my heart!

A board of holly and a board of elder,
Oh the brown and the yellow ale,
And two great yards of sacking about me.
Oh, oh, love of my heart!

If it wasn't that my own little mother was a woman,
Oh the brown and the yellow ale,
I'd sing you another pretty song about women.
Oh, oh, love of my heart!

CW: Thank you all very much. And I'm very grateful to this panel for supporting us this evening. Thank you.

Transcribed by Ann Skea ©. Edited by Colin Wilcockson, Daniel Huws and Claas Kazzner.

Thanks to Mark Wormald for permission to transcribe this recording; to Terence McCaughey for permission to reproduce his memoir in full; and to Richard Hollis for additional information.

For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes introduces Thor Vilhjalmsson at the ICA. 7 June, 1996.

ICA No: 1431. World Literature. News from the Written Word.

Transcript © Ann Skea. The master tape is presumably held by the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, but all my attempts to verify this have failed. It is not amongst the ICA holdings at the British Library. Nor is it in the ICA Archive at Tate Britain

Fiona Shaw read from Justice Undone by Thor Vilhjalmsson. This was followed by Ted

Hughes' introduction of Thor, who later answered questions from the audience.

[Clapping]

Ted Hughes: After that I feel sort of superfluous.

I was really going to simply welcome Thor to England and his book into English, and say something, really, of how I see what you've just heard, and the rest of his writing – or what I've read of it. What I know of it. Where it comes from and what it fits into. Because I think just hearing it, as we're so little aware, perhaps really (most of us) of Icelandic literature and the long tradition of Icelandic literature, that we read it more or less as just a modern European novel – we might. But I think it's something very different; and I was first attracted to Iceland, itself, by the sagas – which I read very early and the read long and devotedly – and by Icelandic folk-lore.

Well the sagas, as you may know, are one of the great bodies of literature in the World's history. The most realistic, bleakest, most formidable tragedies that any group of men have ever put together. Where the hardest conditions of life and the highest values and, somehow or other, the collision of all those early warrior races of Northern Europe are like the forge, where all those things came together and produced – for a short space – these extraordinary stories about just ordinary happenings among the Icelandic families. And they're remarkable for being – not only for this intense, strange, economic realism – but for the fact that they're rooted in this peculiar land, this unreal moon-land, which is really a volcano, just covered with whatever managed to grow on this volcano.

And these very few people, these scattered families, all more or less at war with each other, because the whole of Iceland, of course, is a matter of farm borders... they say one man in every three in Iceland is a lawyer; they're the most litigious people in the world, continually struggling and embattled with each other. That's why they had to invent there a great parliament, just to deal with the problems. But not only... These sagas are not only just these bleak, realistic, very bare tales, they're also of a piece with that early European legendary history – legendary literature. And Icelandic folk-lore is both completely different and yet all-of-a-part with it. Icelandic folk-lore is the most haunted, ghostly, peculiar folk-lore I know of. They're all – all the stories are as if real stories. They're not about – (well, they are about the various gods, when you go right back into the early Icelandic poetry) – but the ordinary folk-lore of the people are anecdotes about just people who lived there, and who lived here-and-there, and the strange things that happened to them, and the strange apparitions that they meet, and the strange presences that permeate their lives. As if everybody in Iceland, as far as their folk-lore is concerned, lives in a world that is not separated in any way from a completely supernatural world. Where the supernaturals are beings, strange powers that live in rocks and river and places, and farms and field corners, and a very strange, saturated atmosphere. But that also moves into the sagas, where occasionally, the weirdest things happen, the strangest, ghostly appearances emerge into these bleak

tales.

So, they were the two literatures that I knew when I first went to Iceland. And I went there really fascinated by Iceland, and to find some fishing. And so I travelled right around Iceland – there's a perimeter road that goes right around the edge. And I'd met Thor before, at a festival long ago in Spoleto. And so I rang up Thor when I arrived in Iceland – the one person I knew in Iceland – my one point of contact. And he was very hospitable – took me in- I went there with my son. And we drove right the way round – called on Thor – from the North to Reykjavik – then right around back to Husavik in the North – then back to Thor. So I saw Thor twice in this complete circuit of the land.

So, I got a very good impression of this bleak, wonderful landscape with its glaciers and its moon sort of bareness, and its strange shoreline – because you're travelling around the shore the whole way – on a track that's like an English farm track for most of the way. And so I got a very strong impression of these bleak homesteads. Wherever you stop in Iceland – it's, I don't know, two-and-a-half thousand miles around – you see a little stream, empty desolate land all around you, and you creep down into this stream, and you think you're going to find a fish in that stream. Then you look up and there's a man watching you from that hill, and there's a man watching you from that hill, and if you move to touch the water [laughing] they're down the hill: [T.H. shouts an Icelandic phrase suggesting "That is forbidden!"]! The whole land is policed in this way. Every man watching his neighbour. And you get the impression of these intense, lonely lives – just boiling passions and the Icelanders themselves (apart from Thor, who I take it isn't really a typical Icelandic – perhaps Margaret isn't a typical Icelandic) – get the impression that they're... they've grown out of the land itself. They don't have the sort of... I think of Thor as being a sort of global character – but Icelanders are very embedded in the landscape itself and it's very difficult to extricate them from it. They're a very serious, introverted set and very difficult to get them to laugh, I noticed. And when they laugh they... Auden makes the remark – when he was travelling through Iceland – he says they have a strange, wild stare and they laugh with the wild stare completely unaltered, so the bottom half of the face laughs and the stare stares at you. And you get this saga – you feel all the sagas are still there just boiling away under the surface.

Anyway, I got this as the impression I'd accumulated on my way around. And at one point, right away in the East at Breiddalsvik, I stayed in a hostel which was a school during the year, but [blank tape] married to a young Icelandic girl, about twenty-year-old, and so we were talking and I said: "Well what do you do in the winters? They're long winters". He said, "Well", – he said he got restless – "But she reads". So I said: "What does she read? What is there to read?". He said: "She reads the sagas". A twenty-year-old, very pretty Icelandic girl, spends her winters reading the sagas. And then he went on to say how they also write books themselves, and they all publish small publications and sell them to each other – or give them to each other. More books published in Iceland, I think, than any country on earth. ([to Thor] Am I right? Is that right?). Certainly more books read. And inside some of these farm houses – some colossal specialist libraries. They're an intensely literate people. So, I was impressed

first of all by this – the fact that the sagas were still there, and still of obviously devouring interest to a twenty-year-old Icelandic girl. That went home.

And then I went around and I ended up again at Thor's house, and he wanted to entertain me for an evening. So he invited in some friends. Margaret and Thor invited in – three lawyers? Three lawyers. So they arrived and we sat... there was silence. And these three grim-faced lawyers – grim-faced Icelanders – and I thought: "Well, is this going to be a heavy evening? Icelandic law [laughing] what do I get into?". And then one of them began, and he told a strange story. And so that started a telling of stories which lasted for the rest of the evening. And on that evening, I accumulated stories that I've lived on ever since.

They were all – they all had an extraordinary quality. They had the quality of the folk-lore – of being absolutely real. All happening to people that the lawyers knew. They were telling these stories about their friends. But being completely strange and bizarre. For instance, I remember one of them – ([to Thor] and you must correct me as I go along) – this is an absolutely typical story – not the most extreme. I won't tell you the most extreme – this was the most credible.

A friend of theirs, another lawyer, had a dream that he suddenly began to court the wife of another lawyer – a friend of his – a woman he knew well. They knew each other socially quite well. ([To Thor] "Yes?"). And so he mentioned this fact among her circle and it was a joke. And then he dreamed again – that he'd been to her again. And so, in his dreams, in a recurrent dream, regularly over the next weeks, he wooed and finally seduced the wife of his friend, in his sleep. And all the time, this particular woman said: "Well, it is a curious fact, but I'm having the dream that he comes to me and tries to seduce me". And when, finally, he managed to seduce her, she said: "Yes, isn't it ridiculous? Here we are, we don't really like each other, and he's seduced me, and we're having this raving affair – in our sleep".

And this was a joke among their friends – among these lawyers. "And then", he said, "the man dreamed that he began to visit the wife of another friend, another lawyer, and began to seduce her". And so this story also became public knowledge. And she, laughing, said: "Isn't it ridiculous, he's trying to seduce me in his sleep, and it's a dream that he comes and he courts me.". ([To Thor] "True?"). Yes. And so this second affair developed and became, again... He seduced her... turned into a raging affair, in their sleep. And the first woman, who all the time was laughing at what was going on – such a ridiculous situation – had a nervous breakdown.

And at the end of every sentence, he would say "True!". Like the sagas – "True!".

And it seemed to me that this... And then they went on to tell, as I say, many more stories like this and many more fantastic than this. But it seemed to me that they lived – these hard lawyers – these hard, modern Icelanders – still lived in that whole historical perspective where the sagas are absolutely present in the landscape – this bare landscape, where so few people live, and where any Icelandic person knows many of the

people, or many of the descendants of the people, to whom these things happened... the places and the farms where they happened. It's all still present and this long history of the folk-lore – the folk-legend, the folk-tales, that have built up as little historical anecdotes – are all still there. But they're not only there as a deposit, they're actually still happening. The Icelanders are still living in this ferment of a supernatural world, in which they're immersed – which is also the bleak world of these hard sagas.

And I think that's the combination behind Thor's writing. I see Thor's writing as a modernisation, a sort of efflorescence from that history. So that when... I read his books in that long perspective and I think that's the way that one can feel their full resonance and see that things are not, in a way, so much part of a modern fashion of literature, so much as natural development of a long history of one of the great literatures of the world.

Thor. As I say, I wanted merely to welcome you here and to welcome your book into England. I'm afraid I have gone on too long but anyway: Welcome and thank you for coming. Thank you.

Thor Vilhjalmsón. Thank you. When you were talking, I was thinking "I hope you go on and on and on". It was so beautiful to listen to you weaving out of this strange world that you were gracious enough to visit – animators... and some were lawyers, yes, some were lawyers. Maybe not all of them. But those who were not lawyers, they maybe outwitted, often, the lawyers in court... And then when you were enchanting us with your gift it was so beautiful that there were suddenly some golden speckles suddenly born out on the leaves out there. Thank you.

[The tape continues with questions to Thor from the audience and his answers].

Transcript © Ann Skea.

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes: Language and Culture.

Interviewers: Stan Correy and Robyn Ravlich. March 1982.

Transcript of the "Doubletake" interview of Ted Hughes by Stan Correy and Robyn Ravlich,
first broadcast 1982, reproduced by permission of Radio National and the ABC (Australia).

Transcript © Ann Skea.

R.R. In recent times the study of language has been taken out of the domain of the poets and given over to the linguists. Most writers are concerned with language as an

instrument. However, Ted Hughes, the English poet and writer, has taken language as a territory for vigorous exploration and in that territory, so the idea goes, there are meanings to be found and mapped rather than just articulated. The language need not be that found in our high culture, in our poetry and novels but, as well, in everyday speech. In addition to his poetry Ted Hughes has made rather dramatic language experiments into two theatre events. In his adaptation of Seneca's play, *Oedipus*, he pared the English language back to basic rhythms and words. And in his play, *Orghast*, which he performed at Persepolis in 1971, he stripped even familiar words away until he found an almost unconscious language of utterance. Stan Correy and I talked with Hughes about these experiments and we began by asking him just how much the literary tradition, in our culture, has impinged on the traditional oral forms of communication.

T.H. Well, I think we were in a situation analogous to, say, the end of the eighteenth century in England, where they felt an enormous... everybody felt - everybody sensitive to language felt an enormously elaborate literary tradition had completely swamped any natural expression - any possibility of stating all kinds of attitudes and feelings that had developed under the surface and were obviously wanting to emerge. And so they - well, I suppose Wordsworth began with his manifesto about the language of men, and so on, and started writing these perfectly simple little ballads that everybody laughed at, because they were so completely simple. But out of that, [came] new attitudes to the immediate relationship between language and what you need to express. It was as if that motive was the real mainspring of the whole literary movement that followed. And I think maybe - not so much now recently - but we're still in a movement that's maybe fifty years old, where the two things are happening simultaneously, aren't they? Where there are writers who are trying to simplify language and draw it as plainly as possible back to spoken language - back to an oral tradition; and parallel with it, there's a whole... there are several schools of language that are elaborating it and making it almost a freakish art-object, in novels and, I suppose, in poetry too. And so we've a continual chronic state of trying to renew a language, that now... that we're continually somehow overburdening with literary effects and devices and stiltifications.

R.R. Is this just common to the language of Western culture - to English? Do some languages wax and wain in this regard? Have strengths and weaken?

T.H. I don't know. I don't know enough about other languages. But in English I think part of it, maybe, that in fact we're now going through one movement after another. Every five or ten years a whole new lot of young writers appear and everything written previously seems too rigid to them; or too stuffed full of things that they don't want to manage, and have no... feel no affinity to; and so they're continually trying to renew language.

S.C. The question of renewing language. You talked about, previously, the simplicity of language: It's very important for someone who is, for example, translating plays for theatrical performance. In 1968, you adapted Seneca's *Oedipus* for a Peter Brook production. Now Seneca's plays are regarded as fairly scholarly exercises, rather than pieces for performance. As a poet, how did you transform that dead language (I suppose) into something living and dynamic for the theatre?

T.H. I think that the job posed the basic problem of your translator. That really, before he translates, he has to decide what kind of translation he's going to make. He's got to

decide whether it's going to be a crib, which is just simply to show a reader what the original is in its barest terms, without any ambition to translate any poetic or extra tones it might have: or whether he wants to use it as a springboard for his own new inventions, something like a whole gymnasium of new exercises and techniques for himself, to crack something open in himself, and develop himself in some way. And the latter sort of translations are like Lowell's Imitations, and so on, and Lowell's plays, too. And I suppose at the other extreme, there's just the old school cribs.

When I translated the Oedipus, I went back to a school crib. I had a Victorian translation which is a very elaborate, stately translation of these very stately, elaborate passages of Seneca's, stuffed full of all... a whole cartload of references to mythological figures. And I had a crib, just a plain word-for-word crib, and a little bit of Latin of my own. And I began by making an absolute word-for-word translation, so that it was just like a – just, well, every variant, and so on, – bracketed variants. Just plain stilted Latin sentences into an English vocabulary. A completely unreadable thing really. But that gave me the... a sense of what, maybe, there was in the original, which I couldn't get from the Victorian translation. All you got from that was stately Victorianness. Then, since I was working with a particular bunch of actors and a particular director, and the director and I knew exactly what sort of play we wanted to produce eventually – and it wasn't simply a representation of the Latin Seneca: in other words, it wasn't a museum performance... trying to restage what probably the original Seneca looked like... it wasn't... had nothing of that. We just wanted to use the text as the basis for a ritualistic drama about Oedipus. R.R. The Director is Peter Brook. Just previously we were talking about how every five years or so we're getting writers peeling back language – looking for the new ways, rejecting what came before – how much went into the choice of Seneca's Oedipus? Just why that sort of work, that comes almost from a language that we now consider dead, and a play so very old? Is it that the mythic quality remains a very constantly recharging aspect?

T.H. That's right. And I think it was Peter Brook's interest in Oedipus – not mine. I was merely called in to do the job of translating it. And his interest in Seneca goes back a long time. The Seneca versions of the old Greek stories are very barbaric, very raw. Under this enormously ornate temple of language there's a very primitive, raw shape of a drama. And this is what he responded to. And this is what he wanted to dig out from all that language. And from the start, it was my idea in the translation to do that – to find some way of discarding the ornateness and the stateliness (and in a way, there's a great majesty of the thing, because they're enormously, impressive, majestic pieces) and to bring out some quite thin but raw presentation of the real core of the play. And in doing that, I shed every mythological reference, which shortened the play by about a third. I shortened every sentence. In fact, I discarded sentence structure. I just dropped, finally, into phrases and words. And all the time this was made much easier for me – I didn't have to imagine a whole new dramatic language and think, "Well, that will sound fine when the actors get at it" – the actors were performing my translation all the time I was translating. So I came up first of all with one version of a part of it, that seemed to me very bare, and to have got through to something essential, and they began to perform and rehearse it, and I began to feel, because of the whole drift of the way Peter Brook and myself – in a sort of joint effort – were driving towards the, some, intense

situation in the middle of the play – that this language began to seem too elaborate. And I stripped it again, and I stripped it... and this process went on and on and on. I went through many, many drafts until, finally, I was down to about 250 words – that's what it felt like – and a rigid, sort of ugly language, which somehow seemed to come out of this central situation that we were driving towards. But I didn't add anything. I just drew what there was out of the original text or out of the original – the implications of the original text. And ended up, finally, with a very short play which just was about ... just a play about this central situation, this little naked knot. And I felt maybe it was much too naked and much too pared away, and the whole thing then just had to depend on pace and intensity. It couldn't – there couldn't be any leisure – because there was no dimension in the language and the whole language was travelling too fast for there to be any rest in the action. So the play finally just had to be performed like an express train. And really that determined, finally, the speed and the bareness of the language that I finally came to.

But I felt that I'd really deprived myself of all kinds of opportunities doing that, But just the way we did it and the very practical necessity of producing the play in that way, forced us to that language. And I thought afterwards that really the way to have done it would have been to go the other way, and make a very elaborate language: try and devise some quite stately formal language, so the whole thing would have been much more statuesque and so on. But it seemed in the early stages of the rehearsal that that just wasn't possible – that sort of language just sort of fell off the play. Until right at the end, when they got to the final performance, and there was just one sentence in the play, that I left in because I'd got infatuated by this particular sentence early on, and that's a very formal, rhetorical shaped sentence, and suddenly, when we'd got to this final state of performance, this sentence was suddenly quite the most interesting sentence in the play. Suddenly that – the life that we'd drawn the whole drama down to – was able to carry that kind of formal, elaborate sentence. But it was too late then to go back and rewrite it all, and probably wouldn't have been possible anyway.

R.R. You're talking about living, growing, changing processes there. How does it feel, being someone who is first and foremost a writer, working in this very living, dynamic role of a translator and adaptor – working with a company of actors who are working through this with you – as opposed to the more literary tradition of translation in the style, say, of Robert Lowell?

T.H. Well I don't know if... I don't really have any experience of translations of plays of any other kind – well of any others than that one I did there, and then other dramatic pieces I did with Brook later, so I don't know... how far that other translations have gone on with the actual rehearsals and have grown with the growth of the conception of just what the play was going to be, finally. When I went to Persia with Peter Brook¹, we were to put on a performance there of – just a performance – there was no basic play – nothing – it was just left up to us. And we had a dozen actors, all different nationalities – different languages – and he just asked me to make a play out of Prometheus Bound², Life is a Dream³, and then all sorts of other little stories that we gradually put onto it, and the texts of the Avesta – the early Persian religious texts. So on that material we began to devise a performance – a sort of show.

S.C. Did your experience with the Oedipus play... did Seneca's Oedipus affect the

way you approached these new works with – for the Persian experiment?

T.H. These were very different. First of all, not having a simple single story at the centre – there was nothing to home in on in that intense way. We had to invent a long series of small scenes. And Peter Brook's basic idea was to, in fact, make it up of many little bits and pieces of the original language or languages. So there was ancient... he found some Professor who had reconstructed the pronunciation of Ancient Greek; he had chunks of Spanish; he had a Persian lady⁴ who'd reconstructed the original pronunciation of the Avestas which she claimed had been completely forgotten, and she had a whole method of pronouncing these texts, and it was really a whole vocal training. It was a... most wonderful sounds. And the original idea was to have a long – like an opera – of clashing languages and sounds. Nothing comprehensible linguistically at all. The sense had to come from the situations that we devised out of these basic texts that we used. And eventually we did devise a kind of play, about an hour-and-a-half. But the original languages were too stiff to use, really, and it was also better for me, I could work more easily, if I... when I... devising my scenes, I simply wrote them in another language – so I invented a language.

R.R. Can I ask you... how you began to go about a task like that? I know you had the Ancient Persian languages and some others as a guide, but how do you begin to really... more than peeling back (the process you've spoken of before)... it's really throwing it all out. And where do you look for it?

T.H. Well I... What made it easier – and it was really much, much easier than I would ever have imagined – was that the play itself provided a closed system of themes. The basic idea being Prometheus and the vulture, and the basic myth of the early Persian religion, and the Life is a Dream – the prince – the cast out prince in the prison who is put back on the throne for a day or two – all these were... I tied all these together in one big system and that gave you certain basic ideas and basic images, which I used as the main ideas for my language. So the main idea in the whole play – the main image which Peter Brook built the whole play around, was just fire. So fire was my first word. And I invented a word for fire. And then another big image was the sun. And so I invented... my word for sun was made out of my word for fire and a word for eating, and so on. So it was like a little hieroglyph word – like a little bunch of images. From there I went through my basic set of themes and having got the sounds for the basic themes the rest of it was developed from that.

I could then develop a whole language by a sort of metaphorical process – of making bundles of the sounds that composed these other ideas, so that any particular word that I needed in my text, I could fit together out of the sounds that I already had. But that became too rigid. That became just like using another language. So after I'd written quite a lot of it in this language, I began to recompose the language and improvise the language. In the end, I abandoned the language altogether and I wrote just in sounds, which I composed through my scene – through the particular scene. We composed it musically; we orchestrated the sounds. And we could only do that when we had the actual scene developing in front of us. The actors knew the way through the scene, they knew approximately the drift of feeling and meaning behind the sounds, and from that point we could begin to cut down the sounds, so that we ended up with a play of cries and whispers and chatterings – really a sort of vocal, musical piece that went with a

very active and, in the end, a very effective action.

And the whole thing was – grew out of itself and belonged to itself and couldn't have been done in any other way. I could never have... I don't see how it would be possible just to make a play of sounds and then give it to a director and say: "There you are, here's a play".

R.R. I think that what I was getting at before ... that it's a very special circumstance of having actors working with you...

T.H. That's right. And you have the action, and you find the vocal music to express the action – or to give the actors a way of expressing what they're going through at that moment. And, in fact, early on, I had translations of my language, of my texts. And of course that was disastrous, because if the actors knew the translation- if they knew the ordinary English, or ordinary meaning of the sounds they were uttering, they just spoke them like ordinary language. And the whole point was to have them speak, not like ordinary language, but have them speak like a sort of super animals and super birds and super-musical beasts. And in the end that's what they did speak like.

R.R. Really it sounds very much as if it is a primeval, almost an unconscious collective language, that lies in the minds of most people. As well as the actors being able to use the language, do you think in performance people were able to go with it as well – that the audience could recognize as a language these utterances and actions that would have gone with them?

T.H. Well I think... It had the satisfaction of music. You felt it was making very important meaning, of a musical kind. You could feel the very... The whole thing had to depend on the shape of sound and feeling; the tensions and relaxations of these noises was the whole music, and so that's what you responded to. It was just intensely interesting sound / action combined, which wasn't music, wasn't language, but it was on the edge of both and, at the same time, it was completely embedded in a very visible evident action. You know people don't stand and make these sounds at each other like two cats in a garden, they were in the middle of heavy things going on. So you were always interpreting the action; or interpreting the sounds by the action; interpreting the action through the sounds. The whole thing was a very strange experience.

S.C. Orghast seems very much like an ultimate theatrical experience. After that experience, how far do you think – when you approach language – how far can you develop – after that experience, after using language in such a way? In what direction can you go?

T.H. Well you don't go any further in that direction. You abandon that and start again with simple, plain speech.

R.R. Does it distress you, after being so involved in such a ... it sounds such a visceral and muscular production, to hear the everyday speech of people outside of the literary and theatre traditions that seem to be bubbling over with all sorts of theories and works with words – just to hear the everyday speech of people?

T.H. But in fact Orghast was – in that way – was nearer to ordinary speech than most literary speeches. What stands between you and whatever's going on inside the play in most poetic dramas, is a mass of maybe highly elaborate and intricate language – but, to some degree, an unnatural and unliving language.

So Orghast was really one step beyond Oedipus in stripping off that intrusive formal, merely communicative or intercommunicative element of language - that intellectual and loaded side of language - to a system of noises - music - that people make to each other. People, for the most part, aren't telling each other anything; they aren't giving each other important information; they're comforting each other with all kinds of musical noises. An ordinary person's speech is infinitely more alive and musical just as sounds and as the note of a voice that you interpret very, very accurately - whether it's a false note or has a false element in it - you can read that very, very sensitively just from the sound of a voice and the inflection of a voice. And in ordinary conversation this is a very rich experience. And it's that richness that we tried to draw on in Orghast, and it's that richness that you're always trying to get back to when you say: "We must write ordinary speech. We must use the speech that we do use, that we ordinarily do use, because that's the only living speech, for some reason or other".

S.C. Are you participating in any further theatrical experiments using language, not in the way you did in Orghast, but perhaps on a different level?

T.H. Not at the moment. No. No.

R.R. What you were just saying about everyday speech that seems to not have interference of sophisticated and complicated language in the way of it all. Does it then suggest that... if for a lot of people, they've considered that cracking literature is almost cracking the code to a culture... would you go as far as to say that if we crack dialect or speech or peculiarity of speech on the street, then we have, really, more of an insight into that culture than through the official culture itself?

T.H. Well I think they're both aspects of the same thing aren't they? I think in the idiom... in just ordinary idiom that everybody uses, you hear it all. And in the literature you hear it all but translated, as though literature is a more formal ordering and translation of what you hear otherwise. But in literature, you don't hear it just as language, you hear it as a system of attitudes and feelings and ideas and so on. Whereas in the speech of - in ordinary speech - you hear it as a purely musical, animal chord which you respond to immediately - but you understand in a very complicated way. You can make enormous interpretation of it. And so I think you have to take them both together.

But what you can't do, I think, is formalize ordinary speech. You can't say: "I will now write in the speech of the people", because you write it as a writer. You've already... your attitude to it turns it into a formalized language, and it finally rests with just the few writers, at any time, who somehow or other manage to be able to do it. Everybody realizes it's an ideal but there are very few writers that can actually tap that colloquial expressiveness of ordinary speech in a written language.

R.R. You've grown up, I think, in a region that has its own dialect almost and a social character that expresses itself through its language, or its quirks of language. How much does that come as a comfort or equip you to deal with language in general? The dialect of West Riding - is it?

T.H. Yes. West Yorkshire. Which I don't speak any more really, you see it disappeared somewhere. But writing verse, it's what I hear. And, maybe because it has disappeared and maybe because it isn't the language of English culture, maybe it's enabled me to keep hold of what was associated with it in the beginning. In other words,

if I had grown up speaking... if my first language had been ordinary English... then the language would have been wide open and permeable by all the later added cultural influences and those first things – that I can hang onto in verse, and make something of in verse – would have been enormously overlaid and evolved and so on. As it was, I suppose they were sealed off and so stayed out of it, were unaffected – as if they were a different language, I suppose. I think it's useful to have your mother tongue and your childhood tongue as a slightly different tongue.

Footnotes

1 In 1971, Ted Hughes joined Peter Brook and the group of actors who then were part of Brook's International Centre for Theatre Research in creating Orghast for performance as part of the Shiraz Festival in Persia.

2 Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound. In 1965, Peter Brook had commissioned Robert Lowell to make a translation of this play but the production fell through.

3 Calderón, Life is a Dream.

4 Mrs Mahin Tadjadod.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes: 'The Critical Forum' Series, Norwich Tapes Ltd. 1978.

Transcript © Ann Skea

Ted Hughes:

Poetry is traditionally supposed to be magical. This use of the word 'magical' is a technical one. Magic is a system of practical techniques invented spontaneously by Mankind from the earliest ages right down to our own - is one way of making things happen the way you want them to happen.

The whole field, of course, is debatable. Because it is, largely, incredible. That someone muttering a few words should be able to cure a sick cow or make a neighbour's house burst into flames, is incredible. But that somebody's prayer should affect the course of some other person's disease, is not so incredible - we call that 'the psychological effect', 'the power of suggestion' or even 'the projection of healing energy'.

In the same way, if somebody hears himself cursed. Especially if the curse is pronounced in a solemn way, and even more so if some incomprehensible, alarming-sounding, mumbo-jumbo phrases are included, we expect that person to be very depressed. Indeed, if he dismisses it with a disbelieving laugh, we expect to see the bad luck drop on him out of the blue.

But here, what we recognize as the power of suggestion, and the foolish impressionability of our subconscious self, mingles in an uncertain way with possibilities

we both believe and disbelieve.

We know that some people can occasionally foresee what is going to happen to somebody else. And we have a sneaking fear, which we defend ourselves against, that maybe some people can actually give fate a twist, and make things happen that might not otherwise have happened. We both believe and disbelieve that.

Everything lies in the dramatic power of the blessing or the curse, our own susceptibility, and our total ignorance of the laws or the anarchy of fate. In this respect, poetry has always been held in particular regard as an agent for cursing or blessing, and for manipulating Man's fate. One use of this, is in the hunting poems that all primitive hunting peoples invent.

These are not celebratory descriptions of a successful kill. They're composed and recited before the hunt, in order to make the hunt successful. In anthropological literature, there exist astonishing descriptions of the operation of that kind of magic recitation. We might say, that such a poem recited before the hunt would affect the hunter - he would become psychologically prepared, hypnotized into the alertness and concentration of perfect confidence, etc. We wouldn't be so ready to agree with the hunter's view of it: that the incantation stupefies the game and makes him give himself up.

We're beginning to accept the fact of telepathic control working between people. The hunter goes one or two steps further and accepts that it works between people and creatures. The telepathic communication between men and the creatures is something that forces itself onto the notice of anybody who lives much among them. Anybody who has done much stalking of wild game, for instance, knows that there are two successful attitudes of mind. One is to concentrate with great force on the fact that the game is already dead: It is a certain kill. This has the effect of paralysing it, or it seems to have. The other, is to deflect one's attention: not look at the game except in occasional glances. This has the effect of keeping it unaware, so you can get quite close.

If you look at the game steadily but casually, it has the same effect as when you stare at the back of somebody's head in a cinema: they turn round and look at you.

However that may be, I've had curious encounters with the old-fashioned type of hunting magic. One in connection with the following poem. After a whole season of very poor success catching salmon, I composed this poem. It describes earlier experiences, and I was writing and rewriting it on and off over two or three years. Naturally, I never thought of it as a hunting incantation - it was just another poem. But then at the start of this particular season, when the angling fever began to make itself felt, I worked at this piece over two or three days and finished it. At last, it seemed to me I'd got it just right. The following day I caught a large salmon. And two days after, two more salmon, one of them even larger. The impression on me, was that somehow I'd broken down their resistance. Everything had to happen as in the poem.

Here it is. I call it 'Earth-numb'. The title refers to the strange, unconscious sort of consciousness in which, it seems to me, all hunting and angling operations take place.

READING: 'Earth-numb' (Moortown p. 95).

The original motive for that poem was not, as I said, to bring the salmon into my power. But the poem did have a motive, which I suppose can be called a magical one.

I set out to write a poem whose whole accent would be, for me, 'upbeat'. I have a superstition that the writer, even more than the reader, is affected by the mood and the final resolution of his poem in a final way. In each poem, the writer to some extent finds and fixes an image of his own imagination at that moment. But if a poem concludes in a 'downbeat' mood, his imagination is to some degree fixed and confirmed in that mood. In the ordinary way, his imagination would heal itself - move on to new moods. But the poem stands there, permanent, vivid and powerful, and tries to make him continue to live in its image.

With this in mind, I once set out to write a whole book of deliberately 'upbeat' poems. At the time, I was a farmer, rearing beef cattle and sheep. And one of the striking things about animals is that their dominant mood is happy - their whole attitude to life is naturally 'upbeat'. I suppose they're not burdened with much in the way of memory and the long history of mortality and its disasters. Anyway, this is especially obvious with cattle and sheep. And through their eyes one feels it in the plant kingdom as well.

While I farmed, I kept a journal of sorts. Whenever some striking thing happened - and on a stock farm, as in hospital, something is always happening - I made a diary note of it, in a rough sort of verse. My idea was to fix the details, so that I might use them in future, when I had more time to work them into poems or whatever.

However, when my farming was over, I looked back and found that some of these entries were already poems of a sort. They were quite unalterable, by me anyway. Some of them bear the signs of that effort I was making at that time to write a book of happy poems - 'upbeat' poems - about the cycle of the seasons. And some of them, I did include in that book. This one, for instance, describes sheep with their new lambs under cover. In bad snowy weather, lambs will often die of exposure. But if they're kept under cover for a day or two, not longer, they get over their first weakness and become very tough. So this is just a diary entry, in very rough verse, just as I wrote it down:

READING: 'Couples Under Cover' (Moortown p. 32).

That is 'upbeat', I think.

But here is another - a record of a disaster - which I tried to turn 'upbeat' at the last moment.

The sheep farmer must expect to lose five percent of his lambs. In this poem the sheep

are lambing on a high field. I visit it every two or three hours to do what has to be done to new lambs, or to any accident that might have happened. On this particular day, on this particular Spring, a gang of ravens made this hilltop their H.Q. for the lambing season. I have with me a three-year-old boy.

READING: 'Ravens' (Moortown p. 37).

It's extremely difficult to write about the natural world without finding your subject matter turning ugly. In that direction, of course, lie the true poems - the great, complete statements of the world in its poetic aspect. I mean that catalogue of disasters and miseries, The Book of Job; or that unending cycle of killings and grief, The Illiad; or the great tragedies. What all these works have in common, of course, is not exactly a final, 'upbeat' note, but it is a peculiar kind of joy - an exaltation. But that's the paradox of the poetry. As if poetry were a biological healing process. It seizes on what is depressing and destructive, and lifts it into a realm where it becomes healing and energizing. Or it tries to do. That is what it is always setting out to do. And to reach that final mood of release and elation is the whole driving force of writing at all.

On one occasion, I had a sick lamb. Its malady was 'Orf', a horrible disease of the feet and mouth. After months of treating this lamb, and getting to know it very well, I decided it could not live. I wrote out an account of what happened, but not as a diary entry - I left it too late - and it wasn't for a week or two that I sat down to try and record it. Already, the incident had mingled with memory and conscience, and it tried to become a poem. It took quite a while to get it into shape.

READING: 'Orf' (Moortown p. 46).

Finally, here is another diary entry, just as I wrote it. I'll read this and leave it to you to decide whether it is 'upbeat' or 'downbeat'. Whether it is depressing or otherwise.

Once, I read this in a hall full of university students and one member of the audience rebuked me for reading what he called "a disgusting piece of horror writing". Well, we either have a will to examine what happens or we have a will to evade it. Whatever your judgment may be, in my opinion the piece can be justified. Throughout it, I might say, I was concerned not at all with the style of writing - simply to get the details of the steps of the events for the record.

When the sheep is producing a lamb, many things can go wrong. If the lamb is big and the mother is small, she might have difficulty getting it out. Or the lamb may come out the wrong way. The worst thing that can happen, is when a small ewe tries to push out a large lamb, and that lamb fails to get his front feet up with his nose but trails them behind. In that case, the head of the lamb hangs outside the mother, while its shoulders are jammed against her pelvis inside. And everything is stuck. If you are quick, there are several things you can do. The main thing is to feel inside the mother and, if possible, find the lamb's front legs and bring them up, and out. Then the lamb should come out in the ordinary way. But this isn't always possible. And, in any case, unless you've moved

very fast, you will be too late. The final resort, then, is as in the following. This entry's dated February 17th.

READING: 'February 17th' (Moortown p. 39).

If poems do have an effect on the writer, I wonder what effect these last two pieces have had on me. Just to be safe, I will round them off with a distinctly 'upbeat' piece, which uses something of their theme, but guides it to a happy conclusion. Again, it's a diary entry and describes the birth of a calf.

The magical operation of these last poems, I imagine, can be guessed from the effect each one would have on us if, say, we'd opened a book at random, asking to be shown our fortune. If we came on the poem of the sick lamb, or the disastrous birth, we would be downcast, maybe - or maybe really depressed - according to our resilience. Imagine having a dream about either of these things.

But if we came on this last one, which I will now read, we could feel quite happy. Just as we would if we dreamed about the birth of a beautiful calf under the end of a rainbow. "Surely", we'd think, "that means things are on the up and up". It might have a big effect. Here's the piece about the birth of a calf called 'Rainbow'.

READING: 'Birth of Rainbow' (Moortown p. 44).

This Critical Forum reading is no longer available from Norwich Tapes Ltd. But a copy is held with other Norwich Tapes in the Library of The University of Birmingham.

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#) [Ted Hughes: The Wound.](#)

Transcript of the interview with Ted Hughes from the Adelaide Festival, March 1976, reproduced by permission of Radio National and the ABC (Australia).

Transcribed by Ann Skea.

Hughes: Well it was a freak production really. At the time I was writing a scenario of the Bardo Thodol - Tibetan Book of the Dead, and I'd been working at this for maybe - oh, maybe six months, on and off, and I'd just about completed the whole thing (I was doing it with a Chinese composer in America) and at the end of it I had a dream, which was the dream of The Wound. A long... much, much more complicated than the play as it is now - but, maybe... Well it was just like a full-length play, with many scenes, many things going on, but along with it was a full text. So I dreamed the action of the play, and was in the play, but simultaneously dreamed a very full text. And came out of the dream - woke up - and in the dream, this play had been written by John Arden - do you know Sergeant Musgrave's Dance? It must have been some memory of that.

And I was furious that this play, which seemed to be so absolutely what I wanted to write, should have been written by somebody else, and that he'd got it. And then as I lay there, it gradually dawned on me that, in fact, if I had dreamed it, it was my play.

Anyway, I went off to sleep again and I dreamed the whole thing exactly the same again, from beginning to end again. Text – everything. So I got up – it was very early – and I just wrote down as much of the text and situations as I could catch. And as I wrote it, it was already fading. I lost the text. But I got the main situation and the main, sort of, sequence of episodes.

But in the dream, it had been a film. And yet the text was like a poetic text, it was sort of poetic-prose text. And I had no intention of making it a film. I didn't see how I could make it a film, but I was interested in writing a radio-drama at that time. So I tried to make a radio play of it. Which meant, in fact, knocking out most of the episodes – most of the purely visual things in the piece. I just couldn't work them into a radio play. I just didn't know how. Anyway, I gradually boiled it down to what it is now.

Interviewer: It is very visual, nevertheless. With those things of – I mean – the disembodied dog, like a kind of white scarf in an Edgar Allen Poe story...

Hughes: That's right. And a lot of the text, in fact, as I eventually wrote it was of course just describing...

It's really a commentary rather than monologues and so on. It's really a narrative description of what's going on.

Interviewer: I was curious about the relationship between Ripley and – Massey, is it?

Hughes: Yes. The soldier and the sergeant. Well I interpreted all this afterwards very... My first feeling was that this was my Bardo Thodol. The story of the Bardo Thodol is the soul who goes to... the soul of the dead man who goes to visit the various Buddhas and at each point he has an opportunity to enter that particular stage of enlightenment that that Buddha represents. And he fails, and he goes on to the next Buddha – and so on. I don't know if you know it. And then, it's assumed that he fails all those and so he goes to Hell. And then he has to go through all the suffering of Hell and, having gone through all that, he then has to find a new womb. The whole last episode of the Bardo Thodol is the search for the womb to be reborn in.

Interviewer: It's very curious that you remembered so exactly. I mean – dreams have an infuriating way of disappearing when...

Hughes: Well, to have dreamed the thing twice. You see the dream obviously intended to be remembered, didn't it? But, in fact, when I woke up and started writing it down the text disappeared very quickly – I just got odd phrases and sentences. And it was a much fuller text – a much longer thing. I cut out most of the episodes, finally.

Interviewer: While some of it – came from Ireland. You must have...

Hughes: I must have read that poem – er – that play of his fairly recently before that. I can't remember that I had. Maybe that was in my mind.

So I interpreted it first of all as a sort of Celtic Bardo Thodol – a Gothic Bardo Thodol – because, in fact, it's full of all the stock imagery of a journey to the Celtic Underworld. And there was a definite, odd, meaningfulness about the two – about the Massy and

Ripley.

I didn't know what to make of that. I didn't like that, really. I didn't look into that too deeply.

Interviewer: The fact that Massey seems to join in the bizarre festivities was, I thought, particularly curious. Is it because he was in a position of authority and could join in these without any danger of...er...

Hughes: I don't know that I can explain it. It was just that... it was just enormously impressive that it came that way in a dream and so that was a thing that was obviously to be kept. But he's a stock – that figure that goes on that kind of adventure, with a hero who's torn to bits in the Underworld – he's a sort of sacrifice to the Underworld, so the other one can escape. He's a standard figure. He appears often in epics – the twin who doesn't come back. But what he means specifically, in the dream sense of my... whatever he meant for me at that time, I couldn't say.

Interviewer: Did you relate the dream to a state of mind that you might have – that you were having at around that time?

Hughes: No. I just interpreted it immediately as my counter to... of my experience of the Bardo Thodol – translated into Celtic Gothic terms.

And the other notion that came with the dream, too, was that the whole thing happened in a dead body. At the moment of his death – the moment of him being killed. So the hole in the chateau was the hole in the head. That was part of my sense of the dream but I made nothing of that, because that is too – that's too interpretative, isn't it?

Interviewer: What about the end 'though, when his comrades catch up with him? In fact, it doesn't appear – in spite of the...

Hughes: That was faked. That was no part of the dream.

Interviewer: Of course, I know, but that's in fact the end.

Hughes: I mean, I put that on – just to get him out of it. In the dream – in the film of the dream, he didn't come out.

Interviewer: Why did you put that on?

Hughes: Because I didn't want to leave him in Hell – [laughs]. I had to bring him back – for my sake. I wanted to end it upbeat, rather than downbeat – simply – so I rigged the end of it.

Interviewer: Is that rather rigged?

Hughes: Rigged? Yes.

Interviewer: It's like a Hollywood happy ending.

Hughes: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you still feel that was the right way to end it?

Hughes: Well, I'm just superstitious about ending works downbeat, because if they're very involved with your own private psychology, where the work ends – that's where you end, too.

You've taken yourself through this process and it's very important that you bring yourself out of a bad process. And if you stop the work in the bottom, in the bad part of the process, that's where, inwardly, you stop.

That's just a superstition.

So I like to bring them out of it in the end.

Interviewer: It struck me, I must say, as not convincing, because of that. I realize you can say "Well, stuff you!", but I thought *The Wound* was so complete...

Hughes: Well, that was perceptive of you. You see, that is the part I stuck on.

Interviewer: Do you get many works out of dreams?

Hughes: I've had one or two – short things – but never anything as elaborate. If only I'd managed to make a film of the whole dream. The thing would have been much longer – many more episodes – that would have been interesting.

Interviewer: What kind of things do you remember leaving out? See, radio is so visual in as much as... I mean, all that tramp across the mud, the castle, the wind – could be done on movie but so much more successfully, I think, on radio, unless there's some fantastic budget. So it seems that other kind of things...

Hughes: I can't remember really now. Just a vague sense of odd things. I can't really remember.

Interviewer: It was done on radio in U.K.?

Hughes: Yes. Long time ago. 1962 or 61. But since then – well, at that time, I told the story to a friend of mine, a writer, and I described this magnificent film that I'd dreamed and how I was trying to write it into a play. And he came to me about a week later and he said, "I've dreamed the most fantastic novel". He'd dreamed a complete novel. And he wrote the novel. So it's an epidemic, you see – that's obviously something that takes hold.

Interviewer: It's certainly... It's an easier way than most methods of writing... What kind of things do you remember – what scenes transferred most easily from the dream to paper.

Hughes: They were all quite difficult, because the whole thing was, finally, not a satisfactory representation of the dream. Some scenes were obviously much more vivid and meaningful for me but they weren't any easier for that. It's very difficult to say now, it's along time ago. It's a long time since I even read it.

Interviewer: We played a... partly because it's very difficult for us Australian actors - there aren't many actors we have who can do... I've only heard it. I haven't read it... so I... Was he cockney?

Hughes: Yes. In the dream he was cockney.

Interviewer: Yes, we played it as cockney.

Hughes: It was done immediately in Germany. It was quite well translated into German, I believe.

Interviewer: Is there much foreign interest in your work?

Hughes: I'm not aware of a lot. There is some. You know, things are translated, then I hear – I get letters from people – and so on.

Interviewer: Obviously the Gothic aspect appealed to the... to them.

Hughes: Well, I suppose that's what appealed to the German audience, yes.

Interviewer: All right. That's, I guess, that. Can I just talk to you briefly about festivals as such meetings of writers -

Hughes: [Laughing] I've just refused to talk about that, to a friend of mine, so let's not talk about that.

Interviewer: Well, you came here because...[indistinct]

Hughes: Well, I was interested to see Australia. This was an opportunity.

Interviewer: [Indistinct]... I think it's very funny and rich for people to, as I heard yesterday, to come to festivals and then shit on us. It's so damned easy to do that. I think that they are... I'm involved in Theatre Australia. We have an annual playwright's conference and much the same thing goes on – except it's very good for the few people who really do get something out of it.

Hughes: Yes. You've to go right into it and give yourself to it, to make it work. The ones I've been involved in in England are very valuable, I think. We have a sort of regular international poetry festival there. They've been tremendous.

Interviewer: Where are they held?

Hughes: In London. And they've had a big effect. Just familiarizing quite a big audience with a lot of – a great range of literature.

This festival's been valuable for me. I don't know whether I've been valuable for it but it's given me an awful lot. It was very much worth coming.

Interviewer: Why?

Hughes: Because of what I've got out of it and being tret [?] so nicely.

Interviewer: Being...?

Hughes: For a festival, you know, it's been very handsomely tret[?].

OK?

Interviewer: OK. I've got nothing else.

What you've given us, it's very good and we'll cut it together and use it as an introduction. It's a good point for... I think in radio – people, if they're not patient for the first two minutes – they're gone.

Hughes: Yes. I think it needs that kind of explanation really, because it's a grotesque thing, isn't it really? And to know that it is just a curiosity – a sort of literary curiosity – redeems it a bit.

Interviewer: I thought the thing about the throat was quite compelling. The whole idea of that very unusual... [?] takes... nose... it's easy to take a prick or a hand or something disembodied – but an actual throat which you don't think of as a separate part but, which the poem brought out, is where the voice is, where you shave, where you get kissed – seems a strange, disembodied thing.

Hughes: The dream was full of that kind of detail. Going into that kind of very literary detail – or at least poetic detail – coming out of the film and the drama and going heavily into the textual sort of detail. It was full of that. I got very little of that. That was the real richness of it. And, of course, what I was really trying to get all the time, was the extraordinary atmosphere of this dream. I don't know how much of that I got.

Interviewer: I must tell you, years ago, being a great fan of Auden's, I came across a picture in Books and Bookmen. And you must know it. It's that picture of you standing and looking reticent – Eliot – and Louis McNeice -

Hughes: Fools in a circle. Yes.

Interviewer: You know, I had great pleasure in projecting what each one was saying.

Hughes: Do you know what we were saying? Do you know what was being said?

Interviewer: No.

Hughes: Well we were just gathering. And the photographer was saying, "come closer together. Come closer together". And Eliot was going, "Ducdame! Ducdame! Ducdame!". Do you know that? It's the – it's from some obscure point in Shakespeare where - but it's a charm to call fools into a circle. [Laughing] It was very good!. He was very witty.

Interviewer: That's good! Just the whole lot – McNeice died not long after that – not long after I saw that picture, anyway.

Hughes: That's right, he did.

Interviewer: He was looking very droll, leaning against the – as if he'd seen all these events many times. And I remember Auden was...

Hughes: Auden was – I suppose Auden was saying something. I can't remember what he was saying.

Interviewer: He looked very pleased.

Hughes: It's a weird picture, isn't it?

Interviewer: I think you look the most... You look very tense.

Hughes: I look as if I'm ready to leap through the window don't I?

Interviewer: Yes, you look very dark. Very much, I suppose, the new boy in the school.

Hughes: That was at a party. There was George Barker in the room behind us.

There was my wife, Sylvia Plath, standing beside the camera -

Interviewer: Was Plomer in that picture?

Hughes: No.

Interviewer: Because I so enjoy his generous mind and, I suppose, particularly the humorous verse. We're doing a thing on him in the months to come. Did you...?

Hughes: I met him once or twice, yes.

Interviewer: Well it's hardly... Just at literary affairs – you didn't have any kind of - employ or association with him?

Hughes: No, I didn't. In fact, last time I met him was at a reading and a long reading in London – where people read poetry for twenty-four hours. [Laughing] I can't imagine anyone on stage for twenty-four hours. I was reading with him, right at the end, very late at night – I suppose it was round about one o'clock in the morning - and a character came on and started bombarding him with cabbages.

Interviewer: [Ploomer ?]? What did he say?

Hughes: He took it very well. I can't remember what he said, but he was quite... Just lobbing them over like grenades.

Interviewer: Well, the picture I saw is still somewhere. And, as my grandfather said after, "If I get one more – one more funeral and I'm the last of the bunch". And I think in that picture you are -

Hughes: Oh dear – bad[?]. [Sharp sucking in of breath] -

Interviewer: - Well, I mean in the picture -

Hughes: Bad omens.

Interviewer: Bad omens, is it? All right I won't do any more.

Hughes: I shall have to rush... I'm supposed to be...

Interviewer: Yes. Well, thank you very much. Thanks for your time. O.K... I'll see you at circuit...

Hughes: [indistinct]

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week, March 1976

A transcription of Ted Hughes' own commentary on the poems listed below, including part of the Crow story.

Page numbers refer to New Selected Poems (NSP), (Faber 1995)

Transcript © Ann Skea.

'The Thought Fox'(NSP 3) 'Six Young Men' (NSP 17) 'View of a Pig' (NSP 34)

'Hawk Roosting' (NSP 29) 'Theology' (NSP 70)'Out' (NSP 72)

'Full Moon and Little Frieda' (NSP 87) 'Examination at the Womb Door' (NSP 90)

'A Childish Prank' (NSP 91)

'The Black Beast' (NSP 94) 'A Horrible Religious Error' (NSP 101) 'Song for a Phallus' (NSP 91)

'Notes for a Little Play' (NSP 116)'Lovesong' (NSP 114) 'How Water Began to Play' (NSP 118)

Ted Hughes Speaks:

I'll read steadily through poems written over about twenty years. First of all, the first poem in the book, which is just a poem about a fox. Which began as a poem about meeting a fox on the top of a bank, and face-to-face. A very impressive moment which I thought I would like to write a poem about, and so I tried and this is... anyway, this is a poem about quite a different fox which I call a 'thought fox' – that is not an actual fox:

I imagine this midnight moment's forest

('The Thought Fox')

...

This is a meditation of a kind - on a photograph of six youths. And it's taken in a valley just below where I lived in Yorkshire and just before the outbreak of the First World War. These six youths were all friends of my father's. And the war came, and this photograph is just one among family photographs - so I've been hearing stories about these characters on this photograph for as long as I've been picking up the photograph and looking at it. There were anecdotes about them. When the war came, they all went off together, and my father went, off together. Apparently the whole – everybody eligible just went into Lancashire, into Rochdale. All these Yorkshiremen joined the Lancashire Fusiliers – they were all in the same company. They all trained together. They all went out together. They all fought together and so they tended to get killed together. So this was sort of the fairy-tale – my early stories – just a poem about these early anecdotes that I heard about these men. This is just a poem about this photograph:

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well

('Six Young Men')

...

For a while, I lived in America, and started a long series of poems that was to be — well, they're all poems about England and my memories of England... They're all poems about animals and birds, and I had a long scheme planned out, and it was also just to be an exercise in style. This was one of the first of them, where I sort of got into it. I never wrote most of them, I just wrote a few of them. So this is just about a pig — a very flat view of a pig:

The pig lay on the barrow dead

('View of a Pig')

...

It went through various phases, that manner, and this was one of the later ones. This is just a dramatic monologue, spoken by a hawk sitting in a wood. So he just sits there and speaks and thinks to himself:

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.

('Hawk Roosting')

...

I wrote a series of lectures for an ideal college, where the whole lecture course would last about half a page. So the whole university went into about twenty pages. This is the theology:

No, the serpent did not / Seduce Eve to the apple.

('Theology')

...

When I first started writing, I wrote again and again and again about the First World War. I suppose because my father's stories made that very near to me, and living in West Yorkshire, where everybody seemed to have lost everybody that went to the war, was a very impressive experience to grow up in. And through Wilfred Owen, probably, whose poems I was greatly infatuated by Ó over long years. I finally decided that really it had nothing to do with me. So this was sort of a ritual poem to rid myself of any further concern with that in an imaginative way — as far as my writing was concerned. It's just

three parts. The first one I called, 'The Dream Time', and the last one is 'Remembrance Day', which is the November day when they sell poppies for the Armistice. I'll just read the three parts straight through. The poem is called 'Out', and the idea is to get rid of the entire body of preoccupation.

The father sat in his chair recovering / From the four-year mastication by gunfire and mud,

('Out')

...

This is just a description of a little girl – a two-year-old girl – looking at a full moon. And 'moon' being one of her first words – so she being very excited to use this word:

A cool small evening stirring to a dog bark and the clank of a bucket

('Full Moon and Little Frieda')

...

I'll read some poems from a long children's story that I wrote which concerns a character who I called 'Crow'. These are just poems from along the way of the story.

The story begins in heaven, where God is having a nightmare. The nightmare appears to God as a hand. And this hand, in his nightmare, is also a voice – so it is a voice-hand or a hand-voice. And this thing comes the moment he falls asleep. This thing arrives and grabs him round the throat, and throttles him and lifts him out of his heaven and rushes him through his universe and pushes him beyond his stars and then ploughs up the Earth with his face and throws him back into heaven. And... whenever he drowns off and falls asleep, this hand arrives and the whole thing happens again.

God cannot understand what there can be in his creation which – (after all he is responsible for every atom in it) – he can't understand what there can be that... is so strange to him and can be so hostile to him. So there's a long, long episode in heaven where he tries to get this nightmare to divulge its secret. Eventually, the voice which is the hand speaks. And the speech of the voice which is the hand is a terrible mockery of God's creation, particularly of the crown of his creation, which is Man.

So this begins a great debate in heaven between God and his nightmare – about Man. And God is very defensive of Man. Man is a very good invention and a successful invention and, given the materials and the situation, he's quite adequate. The voice just continues with its mocking that Man is absolutely hopeless.

It so happens, that while the debate has been going on, and even before, while God was continually absorbed in his nightmare, Man, on the Earth, had sent up a

representative to the Gates of Heaven. This representative had been knocking on the marble gates and God had been so preoccupied with his nightmare that he hadn't heard him. So this little figure was sitting in the Gate of Heaven waiting for God to hear him. And now the voice which is a hand, as the absolute last, triumphant point of his argument, asks this little figure to speak – this little representative of Man. And it so happens that Man has sent this little figure up to ask God to take life back because men are fed up with it. God is enraged that Man has let him down in this way in front of the demon, so he challenges the voice to do better – given the materials and the whole set up – just to do better – produce something better than Man.

This is what the voice has been negotiating for. So, with a great howl of delight, he plunges down into matter and God turns Man round and pushes him back down into the World. Then God is very curious to see what the production will be when this voice has produced whatever it is he wants to produce. Anyway, the voice begins to ferment and gestate in matter, and the little thing begins to develop – a little nucleus of something or other – a little embryo begins. But before it can get born, it has to go through all manner of adventures, which it goes through and, finally, it gets to the point of being born. Then, just before it can get born, there's an examination.

This is his examination at the womb door - and it's a sort of vocal examination. So, I give you the question and the answer. And because of all the adventures he's been through, he's a very canny embryo - little figure now. So his answers are circumspect. And the first question in the examination is, "Who owns these scrawny little feet?". And he thinks - and thinks he's going to be outflanked in some way – so he thinks long thoughts, short thoughts, and he answers – "Death":

Who owns this bristly, scorched-looking face? Death.

('Examination at the Womb Door')

...

But this world he appears into is a world where everything is happening simultaneously, so the beginning and end are present, and all the episodes of all history are present, as in all the different rooms of a gigantic hotel. And God, having come down into the world to see how this creature is going to size up – he, first of all, seeing what a wretched, black, horrible little nothing it is – he's rather indulgent toward it and tends to show it the beauties of the creation, and let it look on whilst he shows the marvels of the beginning.

So this is an episode from the beginning, where God has created Man's and Woman's bodies and he's trying to get souls into them. The Talmudic legend is that, when God created Adam and Eve, he took soil from the four corners of the Earth, so that Man shouldn't feel lost whenever he wandered on the Earth. He moulded these two beautiful people but then he couldn't get the souls into them, because the souls out in the gulf – being just souls – were completely clairvoyant and knew everything that was going to happen to them. They didn't want to go into the bodies. So the great problem, before

anything can happen at all in Talmudic literature, is how is the soul to be got into the body? God has this problem – a permanent problem – and Crow sees a short-cut (a very obvious short-cut) which has great consequences in the story later on. So this is what happened:

Man's and Woman's bodies lay without souls,

('A Childish Prank')

...

As he goes along and has many adventures, everything that he meets tells a different story about what he does or what happens to him. So these are just various little episodes from it. This one is about the Black Beast:

Where is the Black Beast? / Crow, like an owl, swivelled his head.

('The Black Beast')

...

As he goes along, a certain question begins to trouble him more and more and more – a fundamental, simple little question, "Who made me?". This turns into a quest for whoever it was that made him and he's quite successful in this quest. He keeps getting very close to whoever or whatever it is that made him, and whatever it is that made him always appears, or nearly appears, in some female form. So his journeys are a continual adventure or recurrent adventures with the Female in various forms. He has a series of encounters, and his misfortune is that he always bungles the encounter. He never understands that this is what he is actually looking for. This is just an account of one of his bumbles.

When the serpent emerged, earth-bowel brown, / From the hatched atom

('A Horrible Religious Error')

...

As he goes along, God, who was first of all indulgent to him, becomes worried, because he sees that this is an alert little beast. So he begins to try and frustrate him. And the more he frustrates him the more able this creature becomes – the more obstacles in front of him the stronger he gets. So he becomes wiser, cleverer, stronger, and he becomes involved in all the cultures, intrigued by all the possibilities and the interesting tales. And early on, he encounters the literature of Oedipus, since he's so involved with his own search, and he reads Sophocles, and he reads Seneca, and he reads Freud. He sees, obviously, that this is open to everyone and he makes his own version. And by now he's begun to produce his own literature but his own literature is very crude. He

produces plays and stories but he can never get more than two characters into the plays and stories – always the same two characters. So when he comes to deal with the Oedipus theme, he's stuck again with these two characters. This is a song from one of his plays – presumably the play is mimed while somebody sings the song – and, as a matter of fact, he steals the entire thing from Seneca:

There was a boy was Oedipus / Stuck in his Mammy's belly

('Song for a Phallus')

...

This is another of his little plays. This is just notes for a play, since apart from when he just writes a song about what happens, he just writes notes for a possible director or producer. Just the notes that you might base a play on – no dialogue, no anything else, but the same two characters that he's stuck with:

First – the sun coming closer, growing by the minute

('Notes for a Little Play')

...

He goes through all his trials and eventually he comes to a great river. Beyond this river is the Happy Land but sitting beside this river, on his bank, is a horrendous woman, an enormous, grotesque and gigantic woman, who forces him to carry her across the river. By one means or another, she gets up on his shoulders and he enters the river. And he wades out over the gravel and the current deepens, and as he gets deeper into the water her weight begins to increase until he finally has to stop. But her weight goes on increasing and drives his feet down into the gravel of the bed of the river, and the water rises to his mouth, runs past his mouth, and at that point she asks him a question. He has to sing the answer and he has to have the right answer. He begins, and he sings and, as he sings – as he gets a little bit of rightness here and a little bit of rightness there – her weight lightens. He keeps on trying to chip a bit of her weight off with little rightnesses until, finally, she's back to the weight she was and he's able to climb out of the holes and go on across the river. But as he goes on across the river, her weight begins to increase again and the whole thing happens again. She asks him another question.

All the questions relate back to his encounters and his experiences with this being that he's been looking for. So they are all questions about the relationship between man and women – or Man and Woman. So they're all really love questions. And they're all dilemma questions, because they don't have an answer. So, this is one of his answers. And the question is "who paid most?". So he begins with the river running past his mouth. And he's only a half creature, so he's completely unmusical. He begins to try and chip little bits of her weight off him:

He loved her and she loved him

('Lovesong')

...

Finally, this is a song taught to him by an eskimo guide that he meets, who teaches him a lot of little stories and songs which become his defence. This eskimo shows him how to adjust himself to the circumstances – in a series of little childish stories. This is one of them. 'How Water Began to Play':

Water wanted to live

...

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Ted Hughes at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week, March 1976

A transcription of Ted Hughes' own commentary on the poems listed below, including part of the Crow story.

Page numbers refer to New Selected Poems (NSP), (Faber 1995)

Transcript © Ann Skea.

'The Thought Fox' (NSP 3) 'Six Young Men' (NSP 17) 'View of a Pig' (NSP 34)

'Hawk Roosting' (NSP 29) 'Theology' (NSP 70) 'Out' (NSP 72)

'Full Moon and Little Frieda' (NSP 87) 'Examination at the Womb Door' (NSP 90)

'A Childish Prank' (NSP 91)

'The Black Beast' (NSP 94) 'A Horrible Religious Error' (NSP 101) 'Song for a Phallus' (NSP 91)

'Notes for a Little Play' (NSP 116) 'Lovesong' (NSP 114) 'How Water Began to Play' (NSP 118)

Ted Hughes Speaks:

I'll read steadily through poems written over about twenty years. First of all, the first poem in the book, which is just a poem about a fox. Which began as a poem about meeting a fox on the top of a bank, and face-to-face. A very impressive moment which I thought I would like to write a poem about, and so I tried and this is... anyway, this is a poem about quite a different fox which I call a 'thought fox' – that is not an actual fox:

I imagine this midnight moment's forest

('The Thought Fox')

...

This is a meditation of a kind - on a photograph of six youths. And it's taken in a valley just below where I lived in Yorkshire and just before the outbreak of the First World War. These six youths were all friends of my father's. And the war came, and this photograph is just one among family photographs - so I've been hearing stories about these characters on this photograph for as long as I've been picking up the photograph and looking at it. There were anecdotes about them. When the war came, they all went off together, and my father went, off together. Apparently the whole - everybody eligible just went into Lancashire, into Rochdale. All these Yorkshiremen joined the Lancashire Fusiliers - they were all in the same company. They all trained together. They all went out together. They all fought together and so they tended to get killed together. So this was sort of the fairy-tale - my early stories - just a poem about these early anecdotes that I heard about these men. This is just a poem about this photograph:

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well

('Six Young Men')

...

For a while, I lived in America, and started a long series of poems that was to be - well, they're all poems about England and my memories of England... They're all poems about animals and birds, and I had a long scheme planned out, and it was also just to be an exercise in style. This was one of the first of them, where I sort of got into it. I never wrote most of them, I just wrote a few of them. So this is just about a pig - a very flat view of a pig:

The pig lay on the barrow dead

('View of a Pig')

...

It went through various phases, that manner, and this was one of the later ones. This is just a dramatic monologue, spoken by a hawk sitting in a wood. So he just sits there and speaks and thinks to himself:

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.

('Hawk Roosting')

...

I wrote a series of lectures for an ideal college, where the whole lecture course would last about half a page. So the whole university went into about twenty pages. This is the theology:

No, the serpent did not / Seduce Eve to the apple.

(‘Theology’)

...

When I first started writing, I wrote again and again and again about the First World War. I suppose because my father’s stories made that very near to me, and living in West Yorkshire, where everybody seemed to have lost everybody that went to the war, was a very impressive experience to grow up in. And through Wilfred Owen, probably, whose poems I was greatly infatuated by Ó over long years. I finally decided that really it had nothing to do with me. So this was sort of a ritual poem to rid myself of any further concern with that in an imaginative way – as far as my writing was concerned. It’s just three parts. The first one I called, ‘The Dream Time’, and the last one is ‘Remembrance Day’, which is the November day when they sell poppies for the Armistice. I’ll just read the three parts straight through. The poem is called ‘Out’, and the idea is to get rid of the entire body of preoccupation.

The father sat in his chair recovering / From the four-year mastication by gunfire and mud,

(‘Out’)

...

This is just a description of a little girl – a two-year-old girl – looking at a full moon. And ‘moon’ being one of her first words – so she being very excited to use this word:

A cool small evening stirring to a dog bark and the clank of a bucket

(‘Full Moon and Little Frieda’)

...

I’ll read some poems from a long children’s story that I wrote which concerns a character who I called ‘Crow’. These are just poems from along the way of the story.

The story begins in heaven, where God is having a nightmare. The nightmare appears to God as a hand. And this hand, in his nightmare, is also a voice – so it is a voice-hand or a hand-voice. And this thing comes the moment he falls asleep. This thing arrives and grabs him round the throat, and throttles him and lifts him out of his heaven and

rushes him through his universe and pushes him beyond his stars and then ploughs up the Earth with his face and throws him back into heaven. And... whenever he drowns off and falls asleep, this hand arrives and the whole thing happens again.

God cannot understand what there can be in his creation which – (after all he is responsible for every atom in it) – he can't understand what there can be that... is so strange to him and can be so hostile to him. So there's a long, long episode in heaven where he tries to get this nightmare to divulge its secret. Eventually, the voice which is the hand speaks. And the speech of the voice which is the hand is a terrible mockery of God's creation, particularly of the crown of his creation, which is Man.

So this begins a great debate in heaven between God and his nightmare – about Man. And God is very defensive of Man. Man is a very good invention and a successful invention and, given the materials and the situation, he's quite adequate. The voice just continues with its mocking that Man is absolutely hopeless.

It so happens, that while the debate has been going on, and even before, while God was continually absorbed in his nightmare, Man, on the Earth, had sent up a representative to the Gates of Heaven. This representative had been knocking on the marble gates and God had been so preoccupied with his nightmare that he hadn't heard him. So this little figure was sitting in the Gate of Heaven waiting for God to hear him. And now the voice which is a hand, as the absolute last, triumphant point of his argument, asks this little figure to speak – this little representative of Man. And it so happens that Man has sent this little figure up to ask God to take life back because men are fed up with it. God is enraged that Man has let him down in this way in front of the demon, so he challenges the voice to do better – given the materials and the whole set up – just to do better – produce something better than Man.

This is what the voice has been negotiating for. So, with a great howl of delight, he plunges down into matter and God turns Man round and pushes him back down into the World. Then God is very curious to see what the production will be when this voice has produced whatever it is he wants to produce. Anyway, the voice begins to ferment and gestate in matter, and the little thing begins to develop – a little nucleus of something or other – a little embryo begins. But before it can get born, it has to go through all manner of adventures, which it goes through and, finally, it gets to the point of being born. Then, just before it can get born, there's an examination.

This is his examination at the womb door - and it's a sort of vocal examination. So, I give you the question and the answer. And because of all the adventures he's been through, he's a very canny embryo - little figure now. So his answers are circumspect. And the first question in the examination is, "Who owns these scrawny little feet?". And he thinks - and thinks he's going to be outflanked in some way – so he thinks long thoughts, short thoughts, and he answers – "Death":

Who owns this bristly, scorched-looking face? Death.

('Examination at the Womb Door')

...

But this world he appears into is a world where everything is happening simultaneously, so the beginning and end are present, and all the episodes of all history are present, as in all the different rooms of a gigantic hotel. And God, having come down into the world to see how this creature is going to size up – he, first of all, seeing what a wretched, black, horrible little nothing it is – he's rather indulgent toward it and tends to show it the beauties of the creation, and let it look on whilst he shows the marvels of the beginning.

So this is an episode from the beginning, where God has created Man's and Woman's bodies and he's trying to get souls into them. The Talmudic legend is that, when God created Adam and Eve, he took soil from the four corners of the Earth, so that Man shouldn't feel lost whenever he wandered on the Earth. He moulded these two beautiful people but then he couldn't get the souls into them, because the souls out in the gulf – being just souls – were completely clairvoyant and knew everything that was going to happen to them. They didn't want to go into the bodies. So the great problem, before anything can happen at all in Talmudic literature, is how is the soul to be got into the body? God has this problem – a permanent problem – and Crow sees a short-cut (a very obvious short-cut) which has great consequences in the story later on. So this is what happened:

Man's and Woman's bodies lay without souls,

('A Childish Prank')

...

As he goes along and has many adventures, everything that he meets tells a different story about what he does or what happens to him. So these are just various little episodes from it. This one is about the Black Beast:

Where is the Black Beast? / Crow, like an owl, swivelled his head.

('The Black Beast')

...

As he goes along, a certain question begins to trouble him more and more and more – a fundamental, simple little question, "Who made me?". This turns into a quest for whoever it was that made him and he's quite successful in this quest. He keeps getting very close to whoever or whatever it is that made him, and whatever it is that made him always appears, or nearly appears, in some female form. So his journeys are a continual adventure or recurrent adventures with the Female in various forms. He has a series of encounters, and his misfortune is that he always bungles the encounter. He

never understands that this is what he is actually looking for. This is just an account of one of his bumbles.

When the serpent emerged, earth–bowel brown, / From the hatched atom

(‘A Horrible Religious Error’)

...

As he goes along, God, who was first of all indulgent to him, becomes worried, because he sees that this is an alert little beast. So he begins to try and frustrate him. And the more he frustrates him the more able this creature becomes – the more obstacles in front of him the stronger he gets. So he becomes wiser, cleverer, stronger, and he becomes involved in all the cultures, intrigued by all the possibilities and the interesting tales. And early on, he encounters the literature of Oedipus, since he’s so involved with his own search, and he reads Sophocles, and he reads Seneca, and he reads Freud. He sees, obviously, that this is open to everyone and he makes his own version. And by now he’s begun to produce his own literature but his own literature is very crude. He produces plays and stories but he can never get more than two characters into the plays and stories – always the same two characters. So when he comes to deal with the Oedipus theme, he’s stuck again with these two characters. This is a song from one of his plays – presumably the play is mimed while somebody sings the song – and, as a matter of fact, he steals the entire thing from Seneca:

There was a boy was Oedipus / Stuck in his Mammy’s belly

(‘Song for a Phallus’)

...

This is another of his little plays. This is just notes for a play, since apart from when he just writes a song about what happens, he just writes notes for a possible director or producer. Just the notes that you might base a play on – no dialogue, no anything else, but the same two characters that he’s stuck with:

First – the sun coming closer, growing by the minute

(‘Notes for a Little Play’)

...

He goes through all his trials and eventually he comes to a great river. Beyond this river is the Happy Land but sitting beside this river, on his bank, is a horrendous woman, an enormous, grotesque and gigantic woman, who forces him to carry her across the river. By one means or another, she gets up on his shoulders and he enters the river. And he wades out over the gravel and the current deepens, and as he gets deeper into the

water her weight begins to increase until he finally has to stop. But her weight goes on increasing and drives his feet down into the gravel of the bed of the river, and the water rises to his mouth, runs past his mouth, and at that point she asks him a question. He has to sing the answer and he has to have the right answer. He begins, and he sings and, as he sings – as he gets a little bit of rightness here and a little bit of rightness there – her weight lightens. He keeps on trying to chip a bit of her weight off with little rightnesses until, finally, she's back to the weight she was and he's able to climb out of the holes and go on across the river. But as he goes on across the river, her weight begins to increase again and the whole thing happens again. She asks him another question.

All the questions relate back to his encounters and his experiences with this being that he's been looking for. So they are all questions about the relationship between man and women – or Man and Woman. So they're all really love questions. And they're all dilemma questions, because they don't have an answer. So, this is one of his answers. And the question is "who paid most?". So he begins with the river running past his mouth. And he's only a half creature, so he's completely unmusical. He begins to try and chip little bits of her weight off him:

He loved her and she loved him

('Lovesong')

...

Finally, this is a song taught to him by an eskimo guide that he meets, who teaches him a lot of little stories and songs which become his defence. This eskimo shows him how to adjust himself to the circumstances – in a series of little childish stories. This is one of them. 'How Water Began to Play':

Water wanted to live

...

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes: Interview and Poetry Reading. Melbourne, Australia. March 1976.
(Unedited tape)

Interviewer: Claudia Wright

Producer: Julie Copeland

Transcript © Ann Skea. Made and reproduced here with the permission of J. Copeland, who owns the tape.

Note: This interview and poetry reading was made for a broadcast by Radio 3AW (Adelaide) at the time of the Adelaide Festival (South Australia, March 1976). Towards the end of the tape, sections of the interview are repeated and some additional questions and responses were recorded. I have included only those parts of these sections which differ from the earlier sections.

Claudia Wright: [Omitted from tape: When you meet the man, Ted Hughes, he's] very tall and very strong looking. And, when you put 'poet' beside his name and when you see 'farmer', the whole thing ties itself together. At any rate, I was wondering how often you felt while you were in Adelaide, the number of undiscovered poets we have in our society? Because they were all around you. All the young poets were lying around your feet.

Ted Hughes: I got the impression that there are a great number. I met, maybe, what? A dozen, and among this dozen there were – must have been five – nearly 50% of my sampling – all in their twenties – who seemed to me really outstanding. Very exciting. Quite unexpected.

CW: Well, how many people can work out who's a good poet and who isn't a good poet?

TH: Well, other poets do it first of all. And then other people eavesdrop slowly. And then after about... if it doesn't happen immediately, then after about fifty years it gets far enough around for him to have a reputation. Takes a long time. Slow process.

CW: When people say that poets are just ordinary people... what is the mechanism, and what have they got that makes them use words the way they use words?

TH: Well that's the mystery. It's just some particular faculty that specimens here and there in any society are given, and it's as though the society decided that they needed somebody to do this job, and so, subconsciously, they chose one, and this faculty develops in him. But this doesn't alter... this doesn't set him outside the society. It includes him into it more widely and more deeply. He just becomes the spokesman for the deepest thoughts and feelings – maybe suppressed thought and feelings – in that society. There's no such thing as a poet without a tribe.

CW: OK. So when that tribe recognizes you, doing that...

TH: Then you have a following. Then people recognize your poetry. Because in your poetry, they recognize their own inner life.

CW: Now, do they treat you, say in England, any different than they would treat you in Ireland, or Russia, or Hungary?

TH: In Ireland, I'd be much more respected, because 'poet' in Ireland is still a sort of sacred role. Poets were second only to kings in Ancient Ireland. And in Russia, I would have, if I managed to balance every other difficulty, I would have a readership of maybe a million or two.

CW: What do you think your readership is here?

TH: I don't know in Australia. In England, I don't know either. Maybe thirty thousand.

CW: Well, for instance, the book *Crow*, how many people would use that as a sort of handbook, in schools in England?

TH: I don't know that anybody would use it as a hand book in schools. But it seems to have quite a strong tribal following among people of a certain imaginative bent. But because it's such exclusive material, it's rather childish material, it's mythological material, there's a whole mass of the more intellectual or traditional part of society that would find a lot in it to take exception to. So it has a rather ambiguous reputation. I don't follow it a great deal too closely. I just hear reactions from the odd individual, from which I make my (sort of) calculations.

CW: Well how do you live in England? Do you live with a reputation of being a writer or do you live as someone...

TH: I lived first of all as a writer. And that became too exhausting, so I took up farming, to get away from just the dependence on writing – or the feeling of dependence on writing. I'm still completely dependent on writing.

CW: Dependent for what?

TH: Dependent for sanity. But having another occupation means that you're not turned toward writing for your livelihood, for your absolute basic subsistence. You know that at the last crunch, you can eat a sheep, or you can kill a bullock, or... And besides, these beautiful animals occupy your whole time, or your thoughts. And the literary world fades away.

CW: We are talking with the British Poet Ted Hughes. Do you think you could read one of those poems from your book, please?

TH: Yes. This is a very early one. This is from long ago. One of the first pieces I wrote. It's about a... it's just a poem about a photograph of six youths taken just before the outbreak of the First World War. In West Yorkshire. A little valley in West Yorkshire. And the war came. These six youths all joined up – went over to Rochdale and joined the

Lancashire Fusiliers. And they all trained together. They all worked in the same company, so they all fought together. And, so, they were all killed together. And these were friends of my father's. So I heard these various stories when I was a child. Anyway, here's the poem. Just meditation on this photograph.

READS: 'Six Young Men' (THCP 45)

MUSIC: 'Gaudete'

CW: I'm looking here at an interview with another Englishman called Jonathan Miller¹, who also came out to the Adelaide Festival. And Jonathan Miller was criticizing... "frivolous vulgarities that pass for good theatre", and he was saying, the – you know, the universe is intelligible but confusing. And the best way to understand it is to take advice, to read, to figure out what a man like Shakespeare meant. Now how do I figure out what a man like you means through your poetry? Do I have to listen to your explanations or can I determine and read anything ... that I want out of your poems? But how do I find out about you?

TH: Well, first of all you have to feel that you're going to like it before you actually look at it. (Laughs). You have to have that bow-wave, coming ahead, of instinct about it. Then you read it and it has to interest you in some way or other. And get hold of your imagination in some way. And maybe that's as far as you get. That sort of stirs you and you see a world in it that opens a world for you – that you'd like to go into. But following Jonathan Miller's lecture... then you've got to find out what's behind it. In other words, what material I was drawing on when I used it; what particular pressure and balance of things I was managing in the temper of the work; and in the balance of lights and darks and heavies, and so on, within the work.

CW: Well, I've been drawn immediately to that book, because it's called Crow. And I...

TH: That's right!

CW: ... love crows, and I like the noise of crows. But most people hate crows, they're frightened of them, and don't like the sound of them.

TH: Yes. Well the most successful thing about this book is the title. Because everybody reacts about crows in one way or the other. But anyway, it's an interesting bird. The most intelligent bird in the world, of course.

CW: Have you had much to do with our birds here?

TH: I've seen your Australian magpies, which are more crow than our crows, actually. More crow-ey. And they're even black-and-white, you see, and the whole adventure of this bird in my book is, first of all, to be not just black but black-and-white, and then completely white, and then human, and then, even get married. It's a process.

CW: Well, where are you going to start in the Crow book?

TH: Well, opening the programme, I was reading one, just before Crow gets born. 'An Examination at the Womb Door' [not on this tape]. So Crow comes into the world – he gets born – and he comes into a world that's just been created. It's also a world that's just on the point of ending. But anyway, there is God creating the world and creating the six days. And so, God takes Crow in hand. Here's a poem about one of these early episodes.

READS: 'Crow's First Lesson' (THCP 211)

MUSIC.

TH: Well, as he goes along, he sees all these early legends are written one way, and then written the other way, and he realizes that the entire theological history of the world is everyman's game. And so he sees that his own version, the real truth of the matter, still hasn't been stated. So here's his version of the figures that figure on the Tree. The Serpent in the Tree, the Garden of Eden, and so on.

READING: 'Apple Tragedy' (THCP 250)

CW: Oh, that's a beaut' version of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

TH: Well, the early versions were just a different arrangement of all the same props.

CW: Do you think that...

TH: Just a matter of how you arrange the props.

CW: Do you think that's... Is that more honest, your version, do you think? More real?

TH: It's as real.

CW: What's the next one you're going to read?

TH: That's a pocket epic. A pocket religious epic that he wrote. But he also wrote many little plays. This is when, late in his days... when he was getting intelligent and culturized. But he never took plays beyond notes, because he realized that, in fact, dialogue, and so on, are a terrible trap for both drama and actor. He never took the act ... *dramatis personae* beyond two, because he realized the moment you get three, you've got complications. And anyway, he couldn't somehow get more than two to do the job. This is one of his plays. Just the notes. Just as he'd write them for somebody to write the play or at least... to put the play together. Just the bare outline of what was to happen, through this play of his two characters, his two regular characters, one male, one female. So, first of all, there's a sort of... gives you the setting:

READS: 'Notes for a Little Play' (THCP 212)

MUSIC: 'Mother, mother, make my bed', sung by Maddy Prior.

CW: When we're looking at Crow, there's a sequence of poems that seem to go together and there's one particularly beautiful one call 'Lovesong'. I was saying to you before, you know, half the beauty of listening to your poetry is watching you, your body and your hands and your face move with all the rhythms of the words.

TH: (Amused) You sound as though I'm a puppet at this side of the table, leaping around. The 'Lovesong' is one of seven. During his long tribulations, he gradually develops some purpose in his life, which becomes a quest to find who created him. And he's no means of knowing who it could possibly have been, but this great need anyway strengthens. And so he's forever, through one clue and another, approaching his creator. And when he gets there, it always turns out that it's some female or other. And so throughout his tribulations he's involved with all sorts of females. Most of them not very human. (Laughs) I mean snakes and that sort of thing. And, anyway, towards the end, he passes over, through big trials, and comes to a great river, finally. And on the other side of the river is a happy land with all sorts of promises. But at the edge of the river sits this gigantic woman who's just like the accumulation of every... everything horrible in the natural world. And this woman forces him to carry her over the river. So he wades out into the current and gets into the deep water, and her weight begins to increase, and he has to stop. And her weight goes on increasing and drives him down into the river bed 'til the current's flowing past his mouth. And then she asks him a question. And he has to answer the question immediately. He has to sing the answer. And the answer has to be right. And so he begins to sing, desperately trying to get the right, right, right, right answer to this difficult, difficult question. And he keeps hitting bits of rightness, and whenever he does her weight lightens and lightens. So he keeps at it, until finally she's back at her original weight and that's the end of the answer. And then he's able to go on. Then her weight increases again, and the whole thing happens again. And so on, seven times. But these questions are dilemma questions, and they're all questions referring to his encounters with this – these females. So, they're all questions about a man and woman. They're all questions about love. And, as I say, they're all dilemma questions. They're all questions without an answer. For instance, this is his attempt to answer the question "Who paid most, him or her?". "Who paid most?" And so he begins to sing very, very desperately, with the water flowing past his mouth:

READS: 'Lovesong'(THCP 255)

MUSIC: 'O there was an old gouty farmer... ', sung by Maddy Prior.

CW: That was British poet, Ted Hughes, reading his poem called 'Lovesong' from a book called Crow. And listening to Ted Hughes, as you'd understand, the poetry isn't just birds and bees and gum trees, it's ferocious and violent and beautiful. Particularly read by the man who writes it. His colleague, Adrian Mitchell², a British poet, looked at

Australia and reflected on Britain and said, “Why do we think poetry is an effeminate lot of nonsense for intellectual people? Poetry is for the people, and it’s written by ordinary men”.

REPEATED SECTION, THEN:

TH: Yes, and there’s also a trap of course. Dylan Thomas was so marvellously good at it that the whole reading became a machinery in itself. Became a sort of tank – a giant armoured, thing, that crushed everything. And finally he was trying to produce poetry to fit this huge armoured thing that lumbered around whenever he gave a reading. And so what his poetry might have been, finally, you just don’t know. But you know it wasn’t what his reading demanded he produce. So the... rather than the reading being a projection of what he really was... could write, the reading became something that demanded he write in a certain way. And so it is dangerous. He was completely hypnotized, himself, by the tremendously powerful thing that he’d created.

CW: Could you read something for me please.

TH: I’ll read you a rural poem. A little poem.

CW: For a country girl. (Laughing).

TH: All right. A bucolic poem. About a pig, a dead pig. Just the body of a dead pig.

READS: ‘View of a Pig’(THCP 75)

TH: Shall I read you another one?

CW: Yes please.

TH: Another bucolic one – about wolves. This is a sort of urban bucolic. This is listening to the wolves howling in Regents Park Zoo, when I used to live just beside the zoo. And once or twice a month all the wolves in the zoo would begin to howl and all the different kinds of dog and foxes...

CW: Once a month?

TH: Two or three times a month. New moon and full moon probably. And this incredible sound for three or four minutes... just go on and on and on. This is called ‘The Howling of Wolves’.

READS: ‘The Howling of Wolves’ (THCP180)

MUSIC: ‘Here’s me bag and me bed...’ sung by Maddy Prior.

REPEATED SECTION, THEN:

TH: [Part missing] ... side and trick it and make it lose heart, but the more he does the more he sets up against, the more obstacles he brings up against it, the cleverer it becomes, the bigger it becomes, the stronger it becomes, the more able, until finally it's a battle between the two of them.

CW: How lovely. (Laughing) I'd like a battle with God. Unfortunately, he usually comes in the usual shape of one sort of person. But still... What are you going to read now?

REPEATED SECTION, THEN:

MUSIC: 'Mother, mother, make my bed... ' sung by Maddy Prior.

CW: How many books do you have on the market? At the moment?

TH: Not quite sure.

CW: Well, I bought one of yours in Adelaide, which was Crow, but you're reading from another one there, which is...

TH: That's New Selected Poems. That's about it.

CW: Can you make a good living from your poetry and the sales of it?

TH: I do make a living from it, yes. But I do other things as well, which earn more. Other sorts of writing and all sorts of indirect activity connected with it – that earns me much more. But I could live on it at the moment.

CW: I don't think many people in this country live on poetry. I don't know of anyone. I think you've suggested perhaps this society in Australia is not being examined hard enough by many... from many literary angles, by many literary people.

TH: I think it's... it seems to me, from my very brief, shallow glimpse, that the last two generations of... in other words, the people who are in our thirties, the people in our twenties, are enormously different. The literary world... the literary outlook is enormously different. Whereas before you just had one or two here and there who were searching and rather lonely figures, now you seem to have a great many who are searching in the same way and very actively examining everything. No doubt they'll produce completely different literature. Whereas you had one or two who were obviously alert and wide-awake, now you have a great number – whole new generations.

CW: Thank you very much for coming this morning, Ted Hughes.

MUSIC.

END OF RECORDING.

REFERENCES

1. Sir Jonathan Miller (b. 1934) . Well-known English author, theatre and opera director, and television presenter. He is also a qualified physician and neuropsychologist.

2. Adrian Mitchell (b.1932) English poet and dramatist.

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options.

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalAdelaide Festival Book Week. March 1976.

Interview with Don Dunstan¹ and Ted Hughes². Made for Radio 3AW (Adelaide).

Interviewer: Claudia Wright

Producer: Julie Copeland

Transcript © Ann Skea. Made and reproduced here with the permission of J. Copeland, who owns the tape³.

"Had six beautiful days at the Adelaide Festival... what a lovely lot they were. A gang of young Australian poets half adopted me. The wine was startling... not exported. I found 3 or 4 really good young writers." From Ted Hughes's letter to Richard Murphy, 31 March 1976. Letters of Ted Hughes, edited by Christopher Reid (Faber & Faber, 2007)
Claudia Wright: Is it difficult when people talk about poetry in this country to get through to people what the poet is and what the poetry is, because it seems to have a sort of veil around it of intellectualism and a certain snobbery? It doesn't get through to the people.

Don Dunstan: I think that there are a a lot of people in this country who appreciate poetry. I can remember doing a programme on the ABC in which I did all sorts of things, like reading bits of Sappho and Shakespeare and Donne, and what have you. And the next day I went to a factory-gate meeting in the Kent Town Waterworks. And it was a fairly torrid meeting, with the water workers there, because I had to tell them that we were going to close down the Kent Town Waterworks and move them somewhere else, and they weren't too pleased about that and they got into me a bit. But after the meeting was over, a couple of characters came up and said "Ey! We saw yer programme on the ABC last night... that Shakespeare bit, and I'll bet... That was absolutely grouse... yer know – the missus wanted us to say. She was beaut mate!".

CW: Ted Hughes, does that happen to you, too?

Ted Hughes: Yes it does. Not so... I don't have such a distinct anecdote of it. But... I don't think there's any particular barrier between... even the most sophisticated kinds of

poetry and any kind of people you can find. Usually the most sophisticated kind of poets come from the simplest and, in a literary way, the least privileged families. It's not a distinct difference in language or the way of looking at the world between the two things. It's just that most people aren't used to the kind of language that most poets will write in, and that most poets will easily become too complicated for anyone else to sympathize with; and out of any ten poets ... ten names ... ten poets you'd choose, maybe only one of them will ever be liked by anybody at all.

CW: Well. People here are saying, I don't know... I've heard it often before... that you are the greatest poet in the world. Is that a title that is, you know, easily acceptable to you?

TH: That has no connection to me whatsoever. Under any circumstances. It's a ridiculous statement.

CW: Well. People say it. Why do they want to think like that?

TH: I think that maybe Zbigniew Herbert⁴ is the greatest poet in the world, but can I find one other person to agree with me? Maybe. Yes, maybe there are quite a few people agree with me. But not many. I wonder...

CW: When you are writing for children, for instance, do you find that it's more compatible, for the response you get from kids, than from adults?

TH: In theatre, if you're writing for children, you can write more imaginatively. You can treat deeper, simpler themes. You can be more inventive. You can use more resources than you can in any other kind of drama. And the children respond immediately... to whatever of that that you use is really alive. And adults will overhear... and I came to this through my own experience of overhearing children's drama... and it struck me that this was really, often, more interesting theatre than anything I could find in adult theatre. And I think this is a mystery that goes through into poetry, too. That you... A child audience can respond to essential things, and so if you imagine you're writing for a child audience, you can write about the things that matter to you most and (that) the deepest things you can lay hold of, and the most difficult things you can lay hold of, and if you can put them over so that a child responds to them, you'll find that inevitably any adult that isn't, in some way or other, spoiled from appreciating them under any circumstances, will also respond to them. If you try to take the same themes and the same material and you write for an imagined adult audience, you'll find that you bring in a whole host of limitations and qualifications, out of your own idea of that adult audience and their reactions and so on, and finally you won't get through to the adult audience, and it's completely gibberish to a child audience. So, thinking of a child audience is a way of simplifying your own way of expression, and of making your material essential and completely alive.

CW: Don Dunstan, when you're doing poetry readings, do you choose poetry by special poets to get an alliance to the community – that community that's going to be sitting out

there listening, whether they're politicians, or they're workers, or they're women or kids?

DD: Yes. I think that in choosing poetry I think that I've got to choose poetry that is going to communicate effectively. One of my problems about this particular festival is that I've been asked to read the poetry of Francis Webb⁵, who is a very private poet. He had an extraordinary ability in the use of language, an extraordinary ability to use its colour and texture very well, but so much of what he wrote you can only understand if you have some kind of glossary about the circumstances in which he wrote it, because he was a very obscure poet in many ways. He doesn't easily communicate and so it's not going to be easy to get over what Francis Webb was talking about, in a simple poetry reading.

CW: Would it, you know... would it not be proper to read, perhaps, Henry Lawson or Banjo Patterson⁶ in an atmosphere like this?

DD: (Sigh) I don't think so. Now Henry Lawson was a great writer. I don't think he was a great poet. I think Banjo Patterson was very much a doggerel poet, too. I think it's time that Australia cut away from the ocker image in poetry and turned to what poets in Australia have really been about. The greatest poet in Australia, so far, is Judith Wright⁷. Judith Wright is the best poet that this country's produced. She's marvellous, tremendous.

CW: Yes, but do you know what Judith Wright says? She says, "All the children that read me at school think I'm dead, because they assume poets are dead",... and this is why... she gets very browned-off with the way that the education system teaches poetry.

DD: Well I think this is right. I think that this is one of the problems about poetry as a form of communication. The fact is that kids have been taught poetry under circumstances where poetry is not communicating to them and so they're a bit browned-off with the idea of reading or hearing poetry. Well I think that poetry readings and the sort of thing that Ted has been talking about now can really change that.

CW (To TH): How do you... how do the kids react to your poetry in schools, the way it's taught?

TH: I get a lots of letters and so on from children. But I only get letters from the children who like it. But a lot of it seems to be taught in schools. It seems to be used a lot in exams in England, and so on. But during the last ten or fifteen or twenty years in England, there's been a whole new kind of teacher, or English teacher. In a way, I suppose they're more... they're more aware of modern literature than the teachers of the previous generation were. At university for instance, modern literature, for me, ended with Henry James⁸ ... nothing came after Henry James. And that pattern of... a way of looking at literature... is... arises from exactly what you're talking about. When I was at school in England, all poets were dead... they were old poets... they were a breed that was extinct. And this newer generation of teachers, in fact, if anything,

neglect earlier poets. They've understood that one of the things that kills literature for children is trying to force onto them writing by poets whose sensibility is completely alien to them, because they belong to another age. I agree with him that Judith Wright is a wonderful poet and it seems to me that... I certainly find more in her than in any other Australian poet. But I know very little about Australian poetry. She's a poet that's managed to be exported. Somehow or other, her poetry's got through to England, at least, and obviously to America. For instance, I think Patrick Wight⁹ is a great poet, he's a very great poet, of a different kind. And there may be others that we just haven't lifted the lid off. They can lie around for a long time in a great country like Australia, which isn't under heavy exam... heavy literary examination from many directions. A poet can be unrecognized ... simply misunderstood. Because there are... what have you... eight to nine-million people? How many people live here?

CW: Thirteen...

TH: Thirteen million people. That's not very many to produce... how many people are interested in poetry? How many thousand... who are going to examine the poets that are writing? So it reduces the number again to how many hundred who are going to be able to recognize a great poet if there is one? It maybe boils down to ten or fifteen people. If they see his poetry. And maybe his poetry isn't even published.

CW (To DD): Do you have any struggles in Adelaide with your opposition or with other politicians... to be able to take stand you do take on culture?

DD: Yes. Over a period I've had a lot of criticism about the amount of money we've spent in this area. In European terms it's really been very small. We don't, for instance, spend the proportion of our budget that a number of German States do in this area. But eventually, I was able to get through the message that it was essential for us to have our cultural facilities as well. And the criticism ceased when the Festival Theatre was first opened. We opened it on a weekend before the official openings so that people could go through it. We stopped counting at twenty-thousand. And from that time on, there was a change round. Previously, the taxi drivers had been saying, "Ah, Don's spending too much money on the ruddy Arts. You know, all this funny business... all these characters coming here with the Arts". Today, the taxi drivers will say, when you get to the Adelaide Airport, "A' ya seen our Festival Theatre?". And it's there. Everybody goes. Everybody loves it. It's theirs. It's not an elitist thing. It's part of the culture of the people. It's working.

TH: It's really a matter of cultivating it isn't it? You speak to Hungarians, or Russians, and they say they publish a book of poems and it's not a few hundred that they sell, it's thousands and millions. And it's not a few teachers and fellow-writers that read it, which is the case here, and the case in England very largely. It's everybody, every truck-driver has a book of poetry lying around in his cab. And it's not that the poetry is simpler. It's complicated, and more complicated and sophisticated than ours. It's just a different attitude, of everybody, to writers. It's just a more... it's a more primitive attitude in a way. That these writers aren't different people, they're simply us... who happen to write

poetry, and this is the sort of poetry we'd write if we began to write. So they feel that, in a way, these belong to them. Whereas in England, and I imagine in Australia, the moment a man begins to write, most ordinary people feel he's cut himself off from them. He's become something unrecognizable and different and strange and, you know, suspicious.

CW: Well, how do you survive in those circumstances?

TH: I live in the middle of a fairly unpopulated County, and the people I know are farmers and builders, and so on. They're not literary people at all. And they don't know me as a writer at all. But just this last six months, after living among them for maybe ten years, this last six months, somehow or other, through one or two specific occasions, it's suddenly gone around that I'm a writer. And I can feel this wall, now, building around me. That they regard me as something strange, and suspicious. In Russia instead, or maybe in Ireland or in Wales, they would immed... my relationship with them would be stronger, because I was a writer. But in England, it's a wall. So I'm... In a way it's isolating me completely from them and then I shall have to go somewhere else.

CW: Can I ask you a question... I was told perhaps you would jump on me... I was very interested in Sylvia Plath, your first wife, and I've never ever heard you talk about it. I mean, I haven't read anything about Sylvia Plath from you and I just wondered if you'd tell me about her?

[Pause]

TH: What could I tell you?

CW: Well, the person that she was. You're telling me that, you know, the reality of people can be changed by the people pressing in on them and I just wondered, you know, the woman... what she was and the poet she was, and how you thought about her.

[Pause]

TH: It's a very big question.

[Pause]

... And when she died she was not much regarded as a writer.

[Pause]

... So in her relationship to other people, to stick to that, for instance, nobody knew her really as a writer except other writers. So that wasn't a complication. Now, I imagine it would be very difficult. I don't know.

CW: Do you think she was unrecognized as a writer?

TH: Well, she was known as a writer, and lots of people were great fans of hers, but everything that was really extraordinary happened in the last six months of her life. And, a lot of that stuff, that she was trying to publish, was not published, it was rejected. It was... people didn't particularly respond to it. It was only when she died that it suddenly became visible.

CW: Was it in... comparative with your writing, sometimes better than your writing do you think?

TH: She was... I think she was an extraordinary genius. But then I always thought that. And... I don't think there's anybody like her... like... Those last poems are something unique in English literature.

CW: Is it very difficult, the relationship of a creative man like you and a genius person like her?

TH: No.

CE: Can you give to each other? I mean...

TH: Sure.

CW: Did she have any great influence on you?

TH: Must have done.

CW: You're not aware of it though?

TH: Not specifically. I might even have influenced her.

CW: I was just wondering... You've brought your father out here to Australia. And you were saying before that most people, you know, who are poets... sort of start off, from ordinary families... the ordinary background... was that your background or not?

TH: Yes. I was trying to think of some English writer who... English poet who, returning to his family and presenting his poems would have been regarded as a monster. But you imagine that Shakespeare would have been quite well understood, but would have been reprimanded. You would think of just the great ones, obviously. Keats, I imagine, they would have just shaken their heads. Wordsworth? They'd probably have told him to come to his senses. After, you know, from the 18th, 19th century, I think whatever it was that developed in England... you call it a kind of philistinism, but it isn't that... it's a resistance to that flexibility of mind and feeling that developed among almost everybody in England, and it's part of English culture, to regard poets as outcasts, vagabonds, somebody who is getting away with it. And every development of literature seemed to

justify this. Maybe less so now, but at any time in the last 300 years. Less so in the last 30 years than at any other time in the last 300.

END OF RECORDING.

REFERENCES:

1. Don Dunstan ((1926-1999) Premier of South Australia from 1996-1997 and 1970-1979. He was well-known for his role in reinvigorating the social, artistic and cultural life of South Australia during his nine years in office.
2. Ted Hughes (1930-1998). British Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death.
3. Julie Copeland remembers that Ted Hughes was jet-lagged and that the interview took place under the trees on a day when the temperature was 40 degrees Celsius. Various sounds of the Festival can be heard in the background.
4. Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998). Polish poet and writer. Ted Hughes was largely responsible for making his work available in English translation.
5. Frances Charles Webb-Wag (1925-1973). A South Australian poet who suffered from schizophrenia. He wrote under the name of Francis Webb.
6. Henry Lawson (1867-1922). Popular Australian poet and writer. Banjo Patterson: Andrew Barton Patterson (1864-1941) Australian bush-poet and writer, best known as the author of 'Waltzing Matilda'.
7. Judith Wright (1915-2000). Well-known Australian poet.
8. Henry James (1843-1916) Born in America but was an expatriate in London from 1876 until his death. He became a British citizen in 1915.
9. Patrick Wight (1912-1990) Born in England to Australian parents who returned to Australia when he was six-months old. He was educated mostly in England, lived for a while in the USA, but spent most of his life in Australia. He became internationally known for his novels. His poetry and plays are less widely-known.

Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options.

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalPhoenix

Sylvia Plath's Ariel and the Tarot

An analysis of Sylvia Plath's use of the Major Arcana of Tarot in Ariel: The Restored Edition.

© Ann Skea.

Ariel 1:
'Morning Song'
'The Couriers'
'The Rabbit Catcher'

Ariel 2:
'Thalidomide'
'The Applicant'
'Barren Woman'
'Lady Lazarus'

Ariel 3:
'Tulips'
'A Secret'
'The Jailer'
'Cut'

Ariel 4:
'Elm'
'The Night Dances'
'The Detective'

Ariel 5:
'Ariel'
'Death & Co.'
'Magi'
'Lesbos'

Ariel 6:
'The Other'
'Stopped Dead'
'Poppies in October'
'The Courage of Shutting Up'

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document or of any pages linked to this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalPhoenix

Sylvia Plath's Ariel and the Tarot

An analysis of Sylvia Plath's use of the Major Arcana of Tarot in Ariel: The Restored Edition.

© Ann Skea.

Ariel 1:
'Morning Song'
'The Couriers'
'The Rabbit Catcher'

Ariel 2:

'Thalidomide'

'The Applicant'

'Barren Woman'

'Lady Lazarus'

Ariel 3:

'Tulips'

'A Secret'

'The Jailer'

'Cut'

Ariel 4:

'Elm'

'The Night Dances'

'The Detective'

Ariel 5:

'Ariel'

'Death & Co.'

'Magi'

'Lesbos'

Ariel 6:

'The Other'

'Stopped Dead'

'Poppies in October'

'The Courage of Shutting Up'

© Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of this document or of any pages linked to this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot (1)

'Morning Song', 'The Couriers' 'The Rabbit Catcher'.

© Ann Skea.

It is true that I am best known as a Ted Hughes scholar and I have published widely on his work, including studies of his use of the occult¹, but the poetic interaction between Hughes and Plath was so close that it is impossible to study Hughes' work without also becoming very familiar with Plath's. So, I was very interested to read Julia Gordon-Bramer's papers on her study of Plath's use of Tarot in her original ordering of the Ariel manuscripts².

In one paper, she writes that "the oeuvre of both Sylvia Plath's and Ted Hughes's poetry, fiction and essays is entirely structured upon Alchemy and a Tarot template – based on the ancient Qabalah". She goes on to say that "every book by each of them, beginning with Hughes' Hawk in the Rain and Plath's Colossus, were written under this mystical

ordering and symbolism, and with enough success that the templates would structure every bit of work each of them wrote throughout their respective lives”.

With regard to Cabbala, in particular, this is not true for Hughes, and I doubt that it was true for Plath, who as late as November 1959 was still vowing, in her journal, to learn astrology and Tarot³.

Hughes, from an early age was fascinated by the poetry of W.B. Yeats and especially by Yeats’ study of magic and his involvement with the Esoteric Order of the Golden Dawn. Following in Yeats’ magic footsteps, Hughes read widely in ancient books of magic and gained a broad understanding of Tarot and of the NeoPlatonic/Christian interpretation of sacred Jewish Cabbala⁴. However, Hughes’ first serious use of Cabbala (but not Tarot) was in the poetic sequence *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, which was published as a limited edition book in 1979⁵. He did not use Cabbala or Tarot again as a framework for a sequence of poems until the creation of *Birthday Letters*, in which he used both with extraordinary care and with a deep understanding of the energies involved⁶.

I have found no such structured use of Cabbala in Plath’s work, although there is plenty of evidence for her use of Tarot imagery in her late poetry.

Tarot is certainly used as a mnemonic memory aid by some, but certainly not by all, Cabbalists. However, Tarot and Cabbala can each be used quite separately, and Tarot is frequently used for divination and fortune-telling by people who know nothing about Cabbala. Tarot can also be used, as Plath seems to have used it, for meditation and inspiration. In her journal entry for 9 February 1958, whilst still vowing to learn Tarot, she contemplated working herself into “mystic and clairvoyant trances to get to know Beacon Hill, Boston, & get its fabric into words”. And Hughes certainly believed in her clairvoyant abilities (which he called her “internal crystal ball”⁷) and he believed that these were in evidence long before she made those entries about learning Tarot in her journal.

It seems likely that Plath was first introduced to a version of the Tarot by her grandmother, Aurelia Greenwood Schober, who taught her to play the popular Austrian card-game of Tarok⁸, a ‘trick’-taking game which can be played with an ordinary pack of cards. The picture cards are used in this game as trumps but no significance is placed on their imagery or symbolism. Later, Plath owned her own Tarot pack. The Marseille deck was given to her by Hughes for her twenty-sixth birthday (SP Letters 18.10.56). She had also bought a copy of *The Painted Caravan: a penetration into the secrets of the Tarot cards*, by Basil Ivan Rákóczi which was published in 1954⁹. Her copy, held in the Smith College library archive is inscribed “Sylvia Plath, London – 1956”. In a letter Hughes on October 16th 1956, she wrote:

I began reading my Painted Caravan book; it is my favourite book;.... I meditate on the Fool and the Juggler, staring at the pictures, reading and re-reading the lucid, pleasantly written descriptions of them and their significance. I shall go through the whole book slowly this way, so that I shall come upon the difficulties of setting out the

Pack with a basic sense, at least, which will flow and re-cross and blend, I think, by great concentration and much practice.

In that book, Rákóczi claims that the basic concepts of all the different religions of the world are to be found in the symbolism of the cards. One can assume, therefore, that, as is the case with most religions and with any secret and potentially dangerous knowledge, an initiate must follow a prescribed 'path' in order to gain mastery of that knowledge. The twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana of the Tarot, when arranged continuously by number in a circle or a figure-of-eight, describe the steps to be taken by an initiate on such a path; and it is usual for the path to be completed a number of times in a lifetime before mastery can be achieved.

My purpose, here, is to investigate whether or not Plath used the Tarot as just such an initiatory journey in *Ariel*, taking the twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana as her guide. And if not, just how the Tarot imagery which is present in the poems might add to an understanding of the poems.

For a number of reasons, I am not convinced by Julia Gordon-Bramer's analysis of the links between particular *Ariel* poems and specific cards of the Major and Minor Arcana, especially as she assumes that Plath used the Rider-Waite deck, not the Marseille deck which Plath is known to have owned. The meaning of the cards is the same, but the images are very different, and some of Gordon-Bramer's analyses rely on the images.

In her analysis, some poems (e.g. 'Barren Woman', 'Death & Co', 'Poppies in October') are said to reflect the imagery and symbols on a card. However, they do not always reflect the deeper occult meaning which the Tarot gives these symbols. Some poems (e.g. 'Thalidomide', 'The Jailer', 'Ariel' and 'Lesbos'), are interpreted as representing the card (and therefore the occult meaning of the card) reversed. This is understandable if the poems show negative energies being confronted and overcome, as would be the goal in an initiatory journey, but this is not always the case in the *Ariel* poems.

Other links made between a particular poem and a specific card are tenuous and not adequately supported with evidence. I know of no precedent, for example, for claiming that nine Major Arcana cards of the Rider-Waite deck (which Julia Gordon-Bramer assumes Sylvia used¹⁰) include mountains in their pictures and that these mountains represent Abiegnus, the Sacred Mountain of Initiation of the Rosicrucians¹¹. She suggests that this is the source of "nine black Alps" in 'The Couriers'. But Plath's nine black Alps (note the capital 'A') could equally be the nine Bernese Alps over 4,000m which are widely known in Europe as important mountaineering objectives. These peaks, the steep slopes of which are black and snow-free, are in Switzerland, but the eastern part of the Alps extends into neighbouring Austria and Plath could well have heard of these peaks from her Austrian grandparents.

Both the above suggested interpretations of the nine black Alps are conjectural but this does not negate Julia Gordon-Bramer's interpretation of Plath's Alps as a symbol of initiation. Yet, what sort of initiation are we talking about and how does this interpretation help us to understand the poem?

And if Plath did use the Tarot to order her Ariel poems, why did she do that?

Was she seeking the spiritual and psychic death and rebirth that is the usual purpose of such a quest? Ted Hughes certainly believed that Plath's writing was driven by the sort of inner, psychological process which "a Jungian might call...a classic case of the alchemical individuation of self"; and that it was a continuous, inner, healing process of death, regeneration and rebirth¹².

Or was she seeking divinatory and occult powers: "the highest philosophy known to the wise and the darkest arts known to the black magician", which Rákóczi claims are part of the ancient wisdom "held under veils" that only a Gypsy Master of the cards can penetrate?¹³

Was she seeking to climb those initiatory peaks in order to achieve success in her writing?

Or, was she simply using individual cards as a source of inspiration as she threw off her old life and began a new one and, because the Tarot symbolism has universal archetypal meaning, they could later be arranged to fit the circular pattern of a Tarot quest? The poems were not, after all, written in the order in which she arranged the manuscripts. And Frieda Hughes, in her Foreword to Ariel: The Restored Edition, writes that Plath "last worked on the manuscripts' arrangement in mid-November 1962"¹⁴, which suggest that, as with her other books, Plath rearranged the order of the poems several times.

I intend to work through the Ariel poems as they are ordered in the Restored Edition, and to compare each poem with the card to which it would be linked in an initiatory Tarot journey. My description of the cards and their traditional meanings will be as brief as possible. And, since this is work in progress, I expect my understanding of Plath's use of the Tarot to change and develop as I go along.

Fool Picture

'Morning Song' (dated 19 Feb. 1961)¹⁵ is the perfect poem with which to start a sequence of poems that celebrate the birth of a new voice "among the elements": it could be the child's voice or Plath's Ariel voice or both. This 'song' prefaces the "handful of notes" which are Plath's Ariel poems and celebrates, too, what for Plath and for the child in the poem is a new life, a new journey, a potentially dangerous step into the unknown future. All of which also makes it a perfect poem for the path of the Tarot Fool, who is depicted as the questing, naive initiate stepping blindly off at the start of his journey, his old life stuffed into a bundle and slung behind him on a stick over his shoulder, and the dog of materialism snapping at his heels.

The rounded vowel sounds in the text of the poem; the child's "One cry"; the fat gold

watch which marks the continuous, circular pattern of time; the naked, flickering, “moth-breath” fragility of the new life, which shadows the lives of the parent(s) with unknown dangers and will, in Nature’s endless cycle of death and regeneration, eventually replace them; the balloons which rise into the air at the end of the poem; and the “Love” with which it begins; all these are exactly right for the scene and the emotions which Plath describes. They also embody the endless circle, the roundness, the zero which is the number of the Fool’s card¹⁶.

‘The Couriers’, however, (dated 4 Nov. 1962) which is the second poem in Plath’s ordering of Ariel and, thus, the second step of the initiatory Tarot journey, does not fit the occult meaning of the matching Tarot card as closely, although at a surface level there do seem to be many connections. Like the ‘The Juggler’ which is sometimes the name of the figure depicted on this Tarot card, ‘The Couriers’ is tricky. The ‘voice’ is strong but the imagery and meaning is not easy to interpret. We are told not to accept various things, each of which seems to be an example of corruption or deception: a snail on a leaf will eat it; Acetic Acid (vinegar) spoils if it is kept in a tin; a gold ring may seem to embody the sun, or true love, but it is only a symbol of these things. The cauldron of the sun seems to be mad and impotent, unable to melt the “frost on the leaf” or to green the black Alps without the help of Nature. Reality reflected in a mirror is disturbed and cannot be trusted: and the mirror of the sea, like the subconscious, is “grey”, unclear, and easily shatters itself. Love, too, is a ‘season’, which means it must change, but we are left uncertain as to whether the speaker knows this and boldly chooses to live only in this season or is ironically declaring that he or she has failed to understand that love cannot last¹⁷.

Magus picture

All this trickery and deception is appropriate to the Juggler and it reflects one side of the double nature of the trickster god, Hermes, who is linked by Rákóczi to this card. Is the speaker perhaps Hermes himself: arrogant and self-satisfied? If so, the poem neglects the other, more valuable, side of Hermes’ nature, for Hermes is the messenger of the gods, and guide to the soul. He invented music, the alphabet and mathematics and is the inspirer of eloquence. He is the Magus, the Magician and the Gypsy Master, all of which are other names for this card. And he, as Hermes/Thoth, is credited with the invention of the Tarot.

The Magus/Magician, according to Rákóczi, symbolizes creative energy, the development of latent powers and the ability to face risks. In other interpretations, the number of the card, which is 1, indicates that the Magus carries the spark from the Divine Creative Source. He may be tricky and devious but he is a most knowledgeable wielder of occult powers, a guide to those powers within us, and a link between us and the original creative energies. For the initiate, he represents the first stage of self-awareness: the first awareness of the need to balance the inner and the outer worlds in order to tap the creative energies within. None of this seems evident in ‘The Couriers’.

‘The Rabbit Catcher’ (dated 21 May 1962) should reflect the third Tarot card, the High

Priestess, who is also known as Pope Joan, Juno, The Wise Woman and The Gypsy Witch. In many Tarot decks, as in the picture in *The Painted Caravan*, she is shown enthroned between two pillars (sometimes labelled Justice and Mercy) and behind her is the veil which hides the secret knowledge. She is the Queen of Heaven, Moon Goddess, oracular sibyl, the passive channel between the physical and the spiritual energies, and the mediator of the energies of creation and destruction. She links the conscious and unconscious mind and, according to Rákóczi, she represents our choices and desires, the Jungian anima, and the awakening and maturing of instinct. For the Initiate, she is the Gypsy Master of Initiation who may or may not open the way to the secret knowledge. Rákóczi also describes her as both evil Hecate and beneficent Isis¹⁸.

Priestess picture

Julia Gordon-Bramer gives the meaning of the High Priestess card as “a powerful woman with no need of men”; and ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ is one of the poems which she suggests reflects the card’s picture and images. But the woman in this poem is not all-powerful. She describes her feelings of vulnerability in this “place of force”. The elements have attacked her, torn at her, gagged her, blinded her with light. The sea seems oily with death, the plants malign, even the tiny flame-like gorse flowers are “yellow candle-flowers” which remind her of the formal rituals of death – they are “efficient”; their beauty “extravagant, like torture”.

It might be argued that the poem reflects the powers of the High Priestess as Hecate, Queen of the Underworld. That it is she who is channelling these forces into this woman’s world, testing her initiate or showing her that the easy, perfumed path leads only to snares, nothingness and more deaths. But the death-dealer in the poem is male. And he is not just a channel for the energies, he is joined to the woman by “tight wires”.

Taking a cue from Rákóczi’s description of the High Priestess, and knowing of Plath’s interest in Jungian psychology, one might suggest that the woman in the poem represents the Jungian anima, the female element in the personality, freeing itself from a dominant and dominating male element of the personality, the animus, which would otherwise prevent her from continuing on the initiatory path. This seems to me, however, to be an imposed and far-fetched interpretation.

None of these interpretations add anything to the poem which is in itself a powerful, skilfully crafted expression of emotional turmoil and distress. A much more likely interpretation is that Plath has adopted the role of the High Priestess. The force, the snares, the excitement, the “little deaths”, all belong to the rabbit catcher himself but also to the poet, who is channelling the energies into the poem as the Moon Goddess, Hecate, Queen of the Underworld. Hughes, in his response to this poem in *Birthday Letters*, identified the “dybbuk furies”, the “Moon’s blade”, and the way this poem, like others in *Ariel*, “came alive” in Plath’s hands “like smoking entrails”¹⁹. Here is Hecate’s witchcraft. And here in this poem is Plath’s precarious and masterly balance between poet and poem, reality and imagination. No wonder ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ was one of the titles she considered for the *Ariel* sequence.

Again, however, we are seeing only one aspect of the Tarot card: only the evil face of Hecate, rather than the beneficent face of Isis. An initiate, or even an Adept or Master, would seek to engage with every aspect of the High Priestess.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. My detailed investigation of Hughes' use of Alchemy in his work was published in my book, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, University of New England, Armidale, 1994.
2. Gordon-Bramer, J. 'Sylvia Plath's spell on Ariel', *Plath Profiles*, Vol.3, Indiana University, 2010. pp.90-99.; 'As we like it: Ariel's Forewords', *Plath Profiles*, Vol. 5. Indiana University, 2012. pp.216-63. "Fever 103": the Fall of Man...', *Plath Profiles*, Vol. 4, Indiana University, 2011. pp.88-105.
3. Kukil, K (Ed.) Entry for 7 Nov 1959, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Faber, 2000. pp.525. See also the entries for 9 Feb. 1958, p.327; 13 Oct. 1959, p. 517; and 4 Nov. 1959, p.523.
4. The NeoPlatonic/Christian Cabbala was developed and taught by Renaissance scholars such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno. Bruno was in England from 1583-85. Shakespeare possibly met him and certainly heard of his teachings. Hughes writes about Shakespeare's use of NeoPlatonic Cabbala in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber, 1992.
5. Hughes, T. *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, Rainbow Press, London, 1979. The press was established and owned by Hughes and his sister Olwyn. My analysis of Hughes' use of Cabbala in this sequence, *Adam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama*, can be found on my webpages at ann.skea.com/THHome.htm.
6. My detailed analysis of Hughes' use of Cabbala and Tarot in *Birthday Letters*, *Howls & Whispers* and *Capriccio* is available as *Poetry and Magic* on my web pages at ann.skea.com/THHome.htm.
7. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', *Winter Pollen*, Faber, 1994, p. 184.
8. Anne Stevenson, in her biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*, records Olwyn Hughes' memory of Plath teaching the Hughes family to play this game. (*Bitter Fame*, Viking, 1989. p.178).
9. Rákóczi, B.I. *The Painted Caravan*, Boucher, The Hague, 1954. Plath's copy of this book is held in the Neilson Library Sylvia Plath archive at Smith College.
10. In her article 'Sylvia Plath's spell on Ariel' (*Plath Profiles*, Vol 3, 2010, pp.91-2) Julia Gordon-Bramer suggests that Plath used either the Rider-Waite or the Tarot de Marseille deck. In her second article, 'As we like it' (*Plath Profiles*, Vo.5, 2012, p.219)

she specifies the Rider–Waite deck as the one Plath “relied on” but she gives no reference to support this information.

11. It is difficult to determine exactly how many mountains are shown on the Major Arcana cards of the Rider-Waite pack. Some cards show more than one mountain, others show multiple peaks. The traditional Tarot de Marseille Tarot packs do not show steep mountains at all, just green ground and hillocks.

12. Hughes, T. ‘Sylvia Plath and her Journals’, Winter Pollen, Faber, 1994, pp.180-2.

13. Rákóczi, B.I. The Painted Caravan, p.15.

14. Plath, S. Ariel: The Restored Edition, Faber, 2007, p.xi.

15. I am using the established dates listed by David Semanki in the Notes to Ariel: the Restored Edition, pp.208-9.

16. ‘Love’ in tennis represents 0.

17. It may be purely coincidence, but ‘Love is a Season’, sung by Eydie Gormé, was part of an LP record released in 1958 and the song was frequently broadcast on the B.B.C.

18. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, pp.30-31.

19. Hughes, T. ‘The Rabbit Catcher’, Birthday Letters, Faber, 1998, pp.144-6.

Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot text and illustrations. © Ann Skea, 2021. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Go To Next Chapter](#)

[Go to Ann Skea’s Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot (2)

‘Thalidomide’, ‘The Applicant’ ‘Barren Woman’, ‘Lady Lazarus’.

© Ann Skea.

My examination of the first three poems in Ariel: the Restored Edition would seem to suggest that Plath was writing poems based on the Tarot cards and doing so in order to make an initiatory Tarot journey. If this was her plan, then, as with any religious or spiritual initiation, she would have needed to work step–by–step through each stage and this would have taken her through the cards in numerical order, from The Fool (card 0) to the World (card 21). At each step, she may have written several poems, one after the other, examining and attempting to balance all the energies, (good and bad) represented by that particular card. And from these poems she would have chosen the one which she considered the best for her Ariel book.

However, the position of the Ariel poems within the broader framework of poems from which she chose (Ted Hughes describes these as the poems written after the publication of *The Colossus* in October 1960¹) does not support this view. The ordered sequence of all forty poems in the restored Ariel, when compared to chronological order in which they were written, appears to be random (see list).

The earliest poem among the Ariel manuscripts is 'You're', which is dated January/February 1960. The latest, is 'Death & Co.', dated 12-14 November 1962.

Twenty-one months and sixty poems separate 'Morning Song', the first poem in the restored edition of Ariel, (19 Feb. 1961) from 'The Couriers' (4 Nov. 1962) which is the second poem. Many other Ariel poems were written during that time, including 'The Rabbit Catcher' (21 May 1962), which is the third poem in the book and which was written more than five months before 'The Couriers'.

Other poems, even those written on the same or consecutive days, are separated in the book: 'Ariel' and 'Poppies in October', for example, both dated 27 October, have become poem 15 and poem 21 respectively. 'Daddy' (12 Oct. 1962) and 'Medusa' (rejected title 'Mum:Medusa'2), (28 October 1962), which might be considered very appropriate poems for the archetype Father and Mother figures of the Tarot's Major Arcana – The Emperor and The Empress – are widely separated, placed in reverse order from that in which they were written, and are not among the first twenty two poems which represent the initiatory steps of the Tarot journey where The Emperor (card 4) and The Empress (card 3) appear.

We do not know what criteria Plath used when she selected her Ariel poems from among the many others she had written from 1960 onwards. Ted Hughes wrote that "when she was assembling a book her self-criticism went up a notch"³; and "a poem was always 'a book poem' or 'not a book poem'"⁴; but he says nothing about the way in which she arranged them.

I am aware, too, that there has been scholarly debate about the finality of the order in which Plath left her Ariel manuscripts. In particular, Tracy Brain, in her paper, 'Unstable Manuscripts: The Indeterminacy of the Plath Canon', examines Plath's editing of her Ariel poems, the changes that she constantly made to text, punctuation and spelling, and the last-minute changes to their order which are indicated by handwritten notes and parentheses on a duplicate contents page and on the original title page. Brain concludes that "Plath's vision [of Ariel] cannot be perfectly ascertained or reproduced" and that "the Ariel we have, as polished as it is, should only be regarded as Plath's latest draft"⁵.

In spite of that, as Ted Hughes wrote in his lengthy examination of Plath's creative process, by December 1962, "the book lay completed, the poems carefully ordered". And given what Hughes called Plath's "instinct for nursing and repairing the damaged and threatened nucleus of self", a process which he saw throughout her work and which he likened to a Jungian, alchemical process of death, gestation and regeneration⁶, it is

entirely possible that she used The Painted Caravan as her guide and chose to arrange her Ariel poems in a pattern which reflected the healing Tarot journey.

Whether Plath wrote any of the Ariel poems with a particular Tarot card in mind, remains to be seen, but I will continue to take the poems as published, and in the order in which they are published in Ariel: The Restored Edition, and to examine them in the light of the Tarot journey to see whether any clearer pattern emerges.

Empressstrip

If, as is possible, the first three poems of Ariel show Plath adopting the persona of a figure on the first three Tarot cards – Fool, Juggler/Hermes, and High Priestess – then ‘Thalidomide’, the fourth poem in Ariel (dated 4-8 November 1962) is quite different. Its matching Tarot card is The Empress, the World Mother, fecund Mother Nature, creator of life and also (because worldly life is transient) the bringer of death.

Rákóczi writes that the initiate reaching this step “learns from her the secrets of nature” and is taught to call up and command “all female divinities and elemental spirits of earth, air, fire, and water”, this includes good and evil spirits. Skill in “the arts, crafts and sciences” will also be made theirs¹.

In many ways, ‘Thalidomide’ exemplifies the results of such learning. The speaker in ‘Thalidomide’, however, is not an ‘Earth Mother’, nor is she unafraid of the earth’s elementals. Rather, she fears the Empress’s deathly power – her “reversed” power as Lilith, Queen of the Night.

In her journals Plath expressed fears of bearing “an idiot or crippled child”². And the terrible deformities that she describes in the poem are those of children whose mothers took Thalidomide during pregnancy³. Yet, she conjures Lilith – the willow-dwelling screech owl – into this poem; and her speaker wonders “what glove/ What leatheriness” has protected her from the moony “abominations” of this Goddess’s “shadow”.

The imagery Plath uses in ‘Thalidomide’ is hallucinatory and often confusing. Some of it can only be understood if you know that a powerful, demonic Moon Goddess like Lilith is present. But although Plath was already skilled in some of the arts which the Empress teaches, even a Tarot Master would hesitate to summon Lilith into existence, if only on a page.

Lilith

Lilith was Adam’s first wife who, having been created from earth at the same time as him, regards herself as his equal and refuses to obey him and lie beneath him. Uttering the name of God, she flies off and leaves him. At God’s intervention, and because she refuses to return to Adam, she is banished to the underworld and becomes a demon who must deliver to God 100 of her offspring each day. So, she preys on unprotected children, and she visits men in their dreams, arouses them or copulates with them, and bears hundreds of children from their spilt sperm. Those who are not delivered to God as payment for leaving Adam, she brings up as spirits and demons. She is sometimes a

screech-owl; and she is sometimes a hairy night-monster. She is known as 'Primordial Lilith', 'Ancient Lilith', 'Grandmother Lilith the Great', 'Great Whore', 'Tortuous Serpent', and 'Blind Dragon'. And she is immortal.

'Thalidomide' begins well enough, with an image of the half-moon – the "half-brain, luminosity" of which, with its dark patches and irregularities, prompts thoughts in the poem's speaker of wrongness and abnormality. The half-moon is quickly personified and linked with a spider⁴ whose "shadow" is linked to grotesque deformities. But what sort of protection would a leathery glove provide from such a 'shadow'? Only if you know of the Moon Goddesses' association with owls, might you associate this with the leather gauntlet worn by those who have tamed raptors and who use such a glove as protection from the bird's threatening claws. Even then, in the context of the poem this makes little sense.

And what are we to make of this "thing" – this "love/ Of two wet eyes and a screech", for which the speaker carpers a space? Since the poem is about Thalidomide babies, it is tempting to assume that the speaker has already given birth once (protected by that leathery glove) and that now, again, she is pregnant and the "space" she is shaping is the womb. But Plath's words do not support this. Pregnancy is continuous not "nightly". Carpentry is more suited to cupboards (or, indeed poems); and "the thing I am given" is a cold, unpleasant phrase with which to describe an unborn child. Those "two wet eyes and a screech" may be loved, but they are very different to the beautiful "moth-breath" and "handful of notes" of the child in 'Morning Song'. And Plath was too good and too careful a poet to have chosen inappropriate words and images to describe a pregnancy.

If what the speaker here is carpentering nightly is this poem, and the half-moon has caused her to fill it with amputations, shadows, and the "two wet eyes and a screech" of the screech-owl, Lilith, what are we to make of the "white spit / Of indifference"?

I can only speculate. The half-moon is too well-formed to be called a "spit" of moon, but spit (or spittle) in folk-lore and superstition, embodies soul-power. The Devil's spit causes despoliation and death; and humans spit to avert evil or to bring good fortune, but spitting for protection or for luck is hardly done indifferently. The evil Lilith, however, may well be indifferent to the harm she causes: this white spit may be hers, and the "dark fruits" which "revolve and fall" may well be her deformed children. Perhaps, too, Plath had in mind the English folklore about blackberries, which belong to the Devil after Michaelmas Day, 29th September, because that was the day on which the Devil spat on them in a fit of temper when he fell from heaven into a thorny blackberry bush⁵. Plath had been delighted with the blackberries in her garden when the family first moved to Court Green, and her poem, 'Blackberrying', written in September 1961, was published in *The New Yorker* on 15 September 1962, just a few weeks before 'Thalidomide' was written⁶.

The sudden introduction of the cracked glass and mercury in the final three lines of the poem is a further confusion, unless one assumes that all that has gone before is hallucinatory, moon-induced images in the mirror of the mind.

It is widely assumed that the speaker in all the Ariel poems is Plath herself, and 'Thalidomide' does seem to express some of her fears about childbearing and, also, about writing deformed poems. But 'Thalidomide' is more than just a poem about that. Plath really does seem to conjure the dark moon goddess and her demons onto the page, and in the final three lines of the poem she effectively banishes her.

Three, as Plath would have known, is a powerful number in magic, and the line breaks dictate the three things which she decrees must happen. First, the glass is broken; next the image is isolated from it; and lastly, it is made to flee, its power is aborted and its poisons are dispersed "like dropped mercury". Mercury from the back of a broken mirror cannot really do this, but the magical power of the poet's imagination can ensure that it does.

Writing to Dr. Keith Sagar about the Ariel poems, Ted Hughes described a hypnotic technique which the notorious magician Aleister Crowley used to demonstrate. It involves, he wrote, "imitating somebody, exactly, until, at some imperceptible point, the initiative passes to you, and they begin to imitate you, and can then be controlled". Hughes called this "the fundamental dynamics of the artistic process", and he wrote that it was "nowhere so naked as in those Ariel poems"⁷. 'Thalidomide', in which at times it seems impossible to separate the speaker from the poet, certainly demonstrates this dynamic: but there is also a third presence in this poem, and both the speaker and the poet are very aware of this Moon-Goddess's power.

Emperorstrip

'The Applicant' (dated 11 October 1962), which is the next poem in Plath's original ordering of the Ariel manuscripts, occupies the position of The Emperor (card 4) in the circular Tarot journey. The Emperor is the 'All Father' and he, together with the Empress, transmits the creative energies into our world. His are the male generative energies, and these may be forceful and destructive, rational, passionless and cruel or beneficent, caring and just. He represents worldly power, the laws of society rather than the laws of nature, and, for the Tarot initiate he teaches the development of self-restraint, self-mastery, and the ability to balance rational powers with those of the instincts and emotions.

In Plath's Tarot book, Rákóczi describes the Emperor as "the One who alone is allowed to part [the] veil" of his spouse. He is a threshold guardian, and through him the initiate will learn "the technique for awakening and using" their latent inner powers. These powers, which are "physical, astral, vital, desire, mental, spiritual and divine", are used "under guidance" ⁸ but essentially they must be used in a carefully balanced way.

The speaker in 'The Applicant' is certainly a passionless threshold guardian and the wielder of considerable power. The applicant must be "our sort of person", complete and natural, but there is no indication of what it is that he or she is seeking⁹.

With the Emperor in mind, what the applicant should be learning is to balance the often

conflicting energies within themselves, to 'marry', so to speak, the male and female aspects of their personality. In Jungian terms, this would be described as integrating the male animus with the female anima in order to obtain psychological wholeness.

The marriages in this poem, however, are of a different kind. The speaker is not identified as either male or female, but because of our own social conditioning we tend to assume it is a man. He is derisory and patronizing towards the applicant. The initial questions about "rubber breasts" and other false body parts are faintly ludicrous and half suggests that the applicant is a woman, but he is called "my boy"; told, like a child, to "Stop crying"; and his insignificance, vulnerability and emptiness ('empty' is repeated three times) are all pointed out.

The marriages he is offered are caricatures of social conventions: a companion to hold his hand and offer tea and sympathy until, as in the marriage ceremony, death do them part; the role of a husband and decision-maker which is like a strait-jacket, stiff, black, funereal and indestructible; and a naked, malleable, "sweetie" – a "living doll", who works, talks, does all the domestic duties and who, eventually, will be worth her weight in gold.

The poem is a superb ventriloquising of an authoritarian voice but the tone of irony which Plath imposes on it is unmistakable. It is a merciless satire of the Emperor and his authority, and of the conventions, laws and restrictions imposed by all such powerful male figures. Far from accepting the Tarot teachings here, she is openly and deliberately defiant. Just as she is in the other poem which she might have chosen to represent this card, 'Daddy'. And it is interesting to note that according to the dates of composition included in the restored edition of Ariel, 'Daddy' was written on 12 October 1962, just one day after 'The Applicant'.

It might be argued that in writing these two poems Plath was displaying just the sort of marriage of reason and imagination that is required at this stage of the Tarot journey. What is missing, however, are the balancing energies of benevolence and love which are also an important part of the Emperor's powers.

Hierophantstrip

If Plath was using the Tarot journey as a framework for her Ariel poems, then 'Barren Woman' (dated 21 February 1961) represents The Hierophant, card 5.

The Hierophant, sometimes called the Pope or the High Priest, is a human being through whom divine energies are channelled into the world. He or she is a mediator, a shaman.

Plath's barren woman is as empty as a hierophant should be and the word 'empty' is suitably emphasised as the capitalized first word of the poem. She is also "Nun-hearted" and "blind to the world" and, therefore, undisturbed by worldly things and in a suitable state in which to channel divine energies. But the imagery throughout the poem seems to have more to do with poetic stasis than with any divine responsibility.

Everything within the speaker is coldly architectural and archaic, the fountain (the only active thing in this “museum”) “leaps” but then “sinks back into itself”, as if all its creative flow is futile. A Hierophant might imagine having a great public in order to transmit divine energy to as many people as possible, but she (or he) does not imagine creating a winged victory like the goddess Nike (who was barren until she slept with her brother Osiris) or bald-eyed sun gods. Nor would the dead be of any importance or hindrance to her.

The speaker, however, imagines a great public associated with her creativity – with her mothering of a winged victory or, possibly, of poems (Apollo is the god of poetry). But she is so haunted by the dead that “nothing can happen”, and her muse, the moon, although sympathetic, is emotionless and “mum”. The word ‘mum’ suggests not only motherly attention, like the soothing of a feverish brow, but also dumbness: the moon offers the speaker no words and is “blank-faced” like an empty page.

Strangely, white Nike appears again in ‘The Other’ (dated 2 July 1962) but as a malign presence. And “bald-eyed” Apollos suggest offspring which lack – are bare of – the life-giving sun which, in ancient myth, is in the eye of Apollo. So, even the things which the poem’s speaker imagines mothering are not necessarily desirable.

Overall, neither in the imagery nor in the content is there much about this poem to identify it with a man or woman who, through intuitive wisdom, is able to transmit sacred, healing energies to our world, as the Hierophant does.

‘Lady Lazarus’ (dated 22-29 October 1962), which would be the next poem on the Tarot journey and, thus, would be linked with card 6, The Lovers, seems at first reading to be similarly remote from the occult meanings of the card.

Traditionally, this card is about choices associated with love. The initiate must learn to distinguish between love and lust, sacred and profane love, the promptings of the body and the needs of the spirit.

In ‘Lady Lazarus’, the speaker tells us from the beginning that she can die and be reborn. She has “done it” three times already. “I manage it”, she says, “One year in every ten”. It is “easy enough to stay put”, she tells us, but three times she has returned to life and, although there is dramatic exaggeration and irony in her tone, it is clear that it is rebirth which exhilarates her. The first time “was an accident”; the second time she meant to stay dead but responded to calls; “Number Three” is, because of the way she describes it, the most dramatic. She taunts her “enemy”, scorns the voyeuristic crowd which “shoves in” to watch her unveiling; and she warns of her phoenix-like nature.

Loversstrip

The identity of her enemy is uncertain, and whether there was any choice in her third death and resurrection is unclear, but there is no love apparent in this poem.

One way in which a link might be made between 'Lady Lazarus' and The Lovers is to take what Rákóczi wrote about the relationship between the God of Love and Thanatos, the Greek god of death, and to extrapolate from that. Love figures on The Lovers card in the form of blind Cupid (Eros) with his bow and arrow but Rákóczi describes the God of Love incarnated by a Gypsy Master at this stage of the initiate's journey as bearing "little resemblance to a cupid" but as "Eros and Thanatos in one". I know of no other Tarot commentary which makes this connection, but although Thanatos (Death) may figure in Plath's poem, there appears to be nothing to suggest that the speaker is choosing "the way of mind and spirit" in the face of the tests and trials set by this gypsy God of Love, trials which Rákóczi describes as similar to those of "Christ in the wilderness" of "Buddha being tested by Mara"¹⁰.

There are suggestions in the poem of the speaker's rebirth being treated as a miracle, like the rebirth of Lazarus or, even, Christ. The witnesses want "a word or a touch", or some sacred relic – blood, hair, a piece of her clothing. And the bringer of death is called 'Lucifer', a title commonly associated with Satan. But 'Lucifer' means 'Light-bearer' or 'Morning Star'. In occult lore, Lucifer is a guide, not "Herr Enemy", as Plath's speaker calls him. And although the morning star is the star of Venus, there is nothing in the poem to do with Truth, Honour and Love, which Rákóczi tells us have been identified with the figures on The Lovers card.

Nor does there seem to be any suggestion in the poem that this is a spiritual rebirth in which the speaker rejects the body and bodily passions¹¹. Instead, she celebrates her body: soon, she tells us, the flesh the grave "ate" will again be "at home" on her. Her derisory passion is obvious. After her third rebirth she is "the same identical woman", and she vows that whatever fires she is subjected to she will rise again.

In 'Barren Woman' and 'Lady Lazarus' the connections between the poems and the associated cards are tenuous but possible. Yet, the Tarot seems to add nothing to our understanding of the poems: rather, it might be said that it adds unnecessary complications.

In spite of this, the order in which Plath chose to place these first seven poems does broadly reflect the initiate's path as described by Rákóczi in The Painted Caravan. Plath has now dealt with the shaping elements of childhood – Mother, Father, Society, and the world around her. If she were an initiate, she would be said to have overcome and rid herself of all worldly influences and passions, emptied herself, and undergone a form of 'death'. And she would now be ready to be reborn at the start of a new, even more testing, phase of spiritual growth.

Looked at in this way, the appearance of Lucifer as her enemy in 'Lady Lazarus' is interesting. Lucifer was a rebel angel. Aleister Crowley expresses this clearly in his poem, 'Hymn to Lucifer', which ends: "The Key of Joy is disobedience": and in 'Lady Lazarus' Plath's speaker is defiant and disobedient. She flouts death and she flouts conventions; she is argumentative, outrageous, blasphemous and, altogether, shockingly rebellious. In addition, it is interesting that Crowley sets out his poem as a

dichotomy between Life and Death. "Without the climax of death, what savour hath life?" he asks; and his "sun-souled Lucifer", through bringing death, gives life meaning, "Love and Knowledge".

I am not suggesting that Plath necessarily knew or was influenced by Crowley's work, although it is possible that she came across this poem in Ted Hughes's books. But Crowley was expressing an occultist's view of Lucifer, and with his poem in mind Lucifer can be linked to dichotomy, choice and love in Plath's poem.

Phoenix

Herr Lucifer may be interpreted as the double-natured god Eros/Thanatos of the Gypsy Tarot Master. He is an alchemist who can change life. And the poem's speaker is his Great Work, his "opus", his a "pure gold baby". Her repeated deaths and rebirths are like the alchemical dissolution and sublimation, purification by fire, destruction of "flesh" and "bone", from which she rises "out of the ash" like the alchemical phoenix¹². And, in the face of a Life/Death choice, Plath's speaker has defiantly chosen both. She, like all who undertake a spiritual quest, is prepared to die, to become "nothing", and to be reincarnated. But she warns that this new incarnation will be fiery and fierce (as one might expect a child of Lucifer to be) and she vows that (like him) she "will eat men like air".

Unfortunately, this final bold claim smacks of hubris and suggests that if the she is an initiate on a quest for spiritual wholeness then she still has much to learn. In spite of this, the next poem, 'Tulips' presents a picture which makes her proud, defiant claims seem like bravado.

REFERENCES AND NOTES (1)

1. Hughes, T. 'Collecting Sylvia plath', Winter Pollen, p.172.
2. "Plath crossed out the word 'Mum' in her first version of the title, 'Mum:Medusa'('Medusa' MSS, folder 1, sheet 1.)". De Nervaux, L. 'The Freudian Muse: Psychoanalysis and the Problems of Self-Revelation in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and "Medusa"', E-rea, 5.1, 2007. p.18.
3. Hughes, T. 'Publishing Sylvia Plath', Winter Pollen, p.165.
4. Hughes, T. 'Collecting Sylvia Plath', Winter Pollen, p.172.
5. Brain, T. 'Unstable Manuscripts: The Indeterminacy of the Plath Canon', in Helle, A. (ed.) The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath, University of Michigan Press, 2007. pp.17-37. My thanks to Carol Bere, a Hughes scholar with extensive knowledge of Plath scholarship, for alerting me to this paper, which she rightly calls "provocative".
6. Hughes, T, 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', Winter Pollen, pp. 180-190.

REFERENCES AND NOTES (2)

1. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, pp.33-4.
2. Kukil, K (ed.), The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 29 March 1958. p.355.
3. Thalidomide was prescribed as a sedative and, especially, for morning-sickness in pregnancy. From 1958 to 1961 when the drug was withdrawn, about 2,000 children with terrible birth-defects caused by Thalidomide were born in the UK. Many died within a few months but some are still living.
4. Anansi the trickster spider man of Plath's poem 'Spider' comes to mind. Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, Faber, 1981, p.48-9. So, too, does Arachne, the mortal who, in Greek mythology, was turned into a spider by the Goddess Athena.
5. Blackberries, in any case, are generally spoiled, grey and maggoty by the end September.
6. Plath, A. (ed.) Sylvia Plath: Letters Home, 4. Sept. 1961 and 12 October 1962. pp. 428 and 466.
7. Reid, C. (ed.), Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. Hughes to Sagar, 23 May 1981. pp.444-5.
8. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.35.
9. Plath spoke of the speaker as "an executive, a sort of exacting super-salesman" who wants to be sure that "the applicant for this marvellous product really needs it and will treat it right". Notes: 1962, Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, p.293.
10. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.38.
11. Plath spoke of the woman as "the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will", but also as "just a good plain, very resourceful woman". Notes: 1962, Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, p.294.
12. In Alchemy, the chemical process of changing lead into gold (the 'Great Work') is also a metaphor for the transmutation of the base matter of a human nature into pure spiritual gold. The phoenix is a symbol of the 'rubedo', the fiery reddening which signals the completion of that process. Ted Hughes's careful use of alchemy as a framework for Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama (Faber, 1978) is examined in detail in my book: Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest.

Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot text and illustrations. © Ann Skea 12 January 2013. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go To Next Chapter

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot (3)

'Tulips', 'A Secret', 'The Jailer', 'Cut'.

© Ann Skea.

Chariotstrip

"Tulips" (dated 18 March 1961), is paired with The Chariot, card 7, and, as with earlier poems, it seems to have little relationship to the usual divinatory readings of this card, which are to do with self-confidence, success, excitement and balance.

In spite of this, Plath's poem describes perfectly the state of an initiate who has just been reborn and is ready to begin the next part of the Tarot journey. Such an initiate has, according to Rákóczi, "suffered the loss of one half of himself, the youthful beloved", and must now "follow the chariot of Pluto into the next world and search for that which was lost in order that the two halves may be reunited and a balance restored"¹.

The speaker in 'Tulips' is like one who has been reborn into a sort of limbo. What she describes is exactly the loss of self – the loss of persona – which marks the start of the second stage of the Tarot journey. She is "nobody". She has given away her name and her "day-clothes", as if giving up her everyday identity. She has given away her "history" and her "body"; has "lost herself" (her self), and is learning peacefulness in a place where everything is wintry, "white" and "quiet". And she has become "just an eye" observing the passing figures of nurses.

The eye/she, is, like a new-born initiate, a "stupid pupil", a passive observer. She is "sick of baggage" – which is linked in her mind and in the lines of the poem, with her "husband and child", and "family": and the ambiguity of "sick with" encompasses 'tired of' and 'made sick by' these emotional ties. Now, she has been "swabbed" clean of her "loving associations" and of all material things and this bathing by the impersonal nurses is like a baptism: it washes away her old life and it leaves her "pure", "empty", peaceful and "free": in a state such as "the dead close on".

This giving up and washing away of all physical, material and emotional attachments, and the religious imagery of the poem, all suggest the death-rebirth of an initiate.

Now, gradually, her re-emergence into life is prompted by the tulips and described, first, through their assault on her senses – sight, sound, weight and touch. She is dragged from her stasis and contentment into a new and terrifying place where she – "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow" – stands as nothing, faceless and effaced, before two dangerous and terrifying powers of nature: the sun; and the earth-grown tulips, which seem to her to be both oxygen-eating plants and dangerous, voracious animals.

Starting with her feelings of humiliation and fear, the tulips gradually drag the speaker into awareness of the turbulent world around her: they "concentrate" her attention so

that, in the final images of the poem, she becomes conscious of the beating of her heart, and links her heart and the flowers with love. Both hearts and love are potent religious and spiritual symbols, appropriate to a spiritual quest.

Finally, with heart and mind reunited, salt water, “like the sea” which is the traditional symbol of the subconscious, provides the speaker with a first taste of her connection with some as yet distant place where wholeness and health can be attained. In terms of the Tarot journey, now, when the initiate must “follow the chariot of Pluto” (who is the god of the underworld and who in Jungian psychology presides over the subconscious), the speaker’s new awareness would indicate that the examination of her inner self (her buried shadow–self; her subconscious; her heart and soul) is about to begin.

Yet, however appropriate this poem is for this stage of the Tarot journey, it seems unlikely that Plath was using the Tarot to shape it when she wrote it. It was written just nineteen days after she had her appendectomy (28 February 1961) and it is a superb and realistic evocation of the dream–like, disoriented state of someone recovering, in hospital, from an anaesthetic. It is interesting to compare it with her journal entry for 27 February 1961, ‘In Hospital’, at which time she was “still whole” and very observant. She wrote “This is a religious establishment, great cleansings take place”; and, of the flowers: “a helpful inmate...brings the flowers back, sweet-lipped as children. All night they’ve been breathing in the hall...”².

Clearly, the religious elements of the poem were already there in her mind when she wrote it, as was the personification of the flowers. This does not mean, however, that Plath did not see how absolutely right this poem was for pairing with The Chariot card when she ordered her Ariel manuscripts.

Unlike ‘Tulips’, the imagery of ‘A Secret’ (dated 10 October 1962) has no coherence. In quick succession we have a policeman, a one-eyed person, an African Giraffe and a hippopotamus (of an extinct species), a brandy finger (like a brandy-snap biscuit) “roosting and cooing”, a grotesque, bastard baby in a bureau drawer or in a stoppered bottle of stout, mayhem in the Place de la Concorde, and a stumbling, speaking, dwarf baby with a knife in its back. The only thing which holds this poem together is the bitter sarcasm of the speaker; and a dirty secret which must be levered out with a knife.

Justicestrip

Nothing in all this suggests the card of Justice, which stands for balance, stability, discernment and tranquillity. Nor, even if the card and its meaning were reversed, does this provide any enlightenment about the imagery in the poem, although it is suitably chaotic.

Rákóczi writes that this card represents “the judgment of Osiris, where the soul of the initiate is being weighed”. He mentions “more licentious sects” where “we have the exaltation of the prostitute as a saint and the saint treated as one who is impure”; and he notes that Gypsies “call this card the Magdalene card” and place it under the patronage of Sara, the Negress saint of the Romany³.

Perhaps, in the poem, there is an element of the figure of Justice being treated as one who is impure. And perhaps the “Edeny greenery”, the “African giraffe”, the “Moroccan hippopotamus” and the “jungle gutturals” are associated with Black Sara, who, according to some accounts, was an Egyptian Abbess of a convent in Libya, North Africa. But this is mere speculation.

Given the stage of the Tarot journey that this poem should reflect, a stage at which the initiate must begin the journey through the underworld of their own subconscious and examine their inner self, let me offer three pictures which may throw some light on Plath’s imagery. All three are taken from Egyptian papyri of The Book of the Dead, which illustrate the place of judgment in which the heart of each newly deceased person is weighed in a balance which is supervised by the god, Thoth (Tehuti).

Thoth

Thoth is the god whose will and power keep the forces of heaven and earth in equilibrium; he is the scribe of the gods and the guardian of the gates of the underworld. Although he is a Moon god, he is known as the ‘Eye of Ra’ – the mind, reason, and understanding of the great Sun god Ra. And he is also “the great god of words”, who can teach the words of power and “the manner in which to utter them”⁴. He is believed to be the originator of the Tarot.

My first picture of Thoth shows him in his typical form as a human with the head of an ibis. Half his body is blue, and blue is the colour which the Egyptians usually associated with him, although he is often shown as other colours. He stands, in profile, with one foot forward and his left arm raised, “holding up one palm” like a policeman.

The second picture shows Thoth standing before the scales on which the heart of the deceased is being weighed against a feather. He has his stylus and a papyrus tablet in his hands ready to record the result. Behind him is a creature – part lion, part crocodile, part hippopotamus – waiting to devour those who fail the test. All these animals, especially the hippopotamus, were regarded as fiends of the dark which must be overcome⁵. No giraffes are mentioned in the Egyptian texts.

The third picture shows Thoth seated in a boat with his associate the ape (a form of Thoth as Lord of Divine Words) who holds before him the Utchat – the Right Eye of Ra (the sun) – which he is ferrying through the underworld. On the prow of the boat, is Thoth’s own Utchat – the Left Eye of Ra – which represents the moon. So Thoth, seen in profile in this picture, has two eyes: all the other figures in the Book of the Dead are similarly seen in profile and have only one eye.

Perhaps this is taking speculation too far. Being one-eyed, of course, is also a common metaphor for not seeing things clearly or for seeing only one side of something.

I offer one more suggestion: Since what is necessary at this stage is self-examination, the speaker in the poem may be a divided self, one half policeman interrogator, the

other, the interrogated. This may explain why, for most of the poem, it is unclear who is speaking and who is being spoken to. Only when lines are in inverted commas does it appear that two people are present, as in lines 33 and 34: "Do away with it altogether."/ "No, no, it is happy there". These lines, however, might still be a single speaker's sarcastic mimicry of an authoritarian figure.

In the end, none of the above suggestions fully resolve the puzzles of this poem. This may be one reason why Ted Hughes chose not to include it when he edited the first publication of *Ariel*, although it could also fit into what Hughes called "the more openly vicious" poems, which he left out⁶.

Hermitstrip

'The Jailor' (dated 17 October 1962) is the ninth poem of the *Ariel* sequence and should represent the Tarot Hermit (card 9).

Nothing about this poem conforms to any representation of the Hermit in Tarot teachings. He is one who carries a light in the underworld. He is 'The Sage', the 'Old One' who represents "prudence, truthfulness, justice, wisdom, courage, patience and the like"⁷, and he is regarded as the initiate's guide to inner wisdom and self-awareness.

In the place of Justice, the light of the Law shone upon the initiate, whose sins are forgiven but must be paid for, and Rákóczi writes that this card "corresponds to the Lord of Karma who allocates the rewards and penalties after the weighing of the lost soul"⁸.

In reverse, the Hermit's energies are said to represent regression, retreat, introspection, and a turning away from the light and from guidance. This is very different to regarding the Hermit as a jailor.

There is certainly punishment in Plath's poem, but there is no sign of the Tarot Hermit. Nor is there any indication that her speaker is taking a step forward in the initiatory journey. The jailor, here, is a torturer: one who hurts the speaker for her dreams "of someone else entirely". He coldly inflicts obscene and horrific punishments. He is associated, too, with both the dark and the light; and his existence depends on the speaker's presence. Three times in the final stanza his needs are questioned; and three times his need for his victim is specified. This is no ordinary lawful punishment for sins.

Anne Stevenson, in *Bitter Fame*, regarded this poem as part of Plath's exorcism of her inner demons and she suggested that it "attacked her longing for her husband"⁹. Yet, it could equally well represent Plath's confrontation with "Johnny Panic" – "The Great Dream-Maker himself" – whose motto is "Perfect fear casteth out all else", and whose "love is the twenty-storey leap, the rope at the throat, the knife in his heart"¹⁰. Plath's story, 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams' reflects much of her own experience with paralysing fear. "Paralysis again", she wrote in her journal on 4 November 1959, "I wonder, will I ever be rid of Johnny Panic?"¹¹.

Now, through the speaker in her poem, in the last two stanzas Plath “imagines” him “impotent as thunder”; imagines him “dead and away”; and, with the three repetitions of ‘Do without’ in the final stanza (each in a separate line so that it can be heard as a command) and the three repetitions of ‘do’ in the final line, she performs a magical ritual of banishment:

“Do without fevers to eat”

...

“Do without eyes to knife”

...

“Do, do, do without me”

In the incantatory rhythms of the poem if spoken aloud, as Plath said all the Ariel poems were as she wrote them¹², and with its triple repetitions, occultists would consider this to be powerful magic.

This has nothing to do with Tarot: but a great deal to do with what Ted Hughes called Plath’s constant and continuing work towards “resurrection of self” and the defeat of “everything that had held her in the grave for ‘three days’, The Other”. In each poem in Ariel, in Hughes’ words, “the terror is encountered head on, and the angel [The Other] is mastered and brought to terms”¹³.

In the light of these comments, ‘The Jailer’ does not represent a specific step in a Tarot journey but can be seen as self-administered psychotherapy of the sort provided by the “psyche-doctors” for Harry Bilbo and other Johnny Panic “converts” in Plath’s story, ‘Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams’¹⁴.

Wheel of Fortunestrip

‘Cut’ (dated 24 October 1962) occupies the position of card 10, The Wheel of Fortune. Traditionally, this card represents change, chance, transformation: it is the Wheel of Life, Fate, and its energies are those of an inevitable, dynamic process which is beyond our control.

At first reading, apart from the accidental cutting of the speaker’s thumb, there seems little to relate Plath’s poem to the traditional meanings of this card.

Certainly, there is a change of mood compared to the previous poem. The speaker in the poem is excited, thrilled by the sudden accident which has occurred. This is “a celebration”. And she is playful, too, giving her thumb an identity of its own which is reminiscent of Thumbkin in the children’s finger-play game¹⁵. Even the “million soldiers”, the “Redcoats” which “run” from “the gap”, are more suggestive of ‘all the King’s horses and all the King’s men’ of nursery rhyme fame than of red blood cells flowing from a cut. Her query: “whose side are they on?” encompasses the Redcoat soldiers and the physical response to a cut – a flow of blood seems to endanger life and yet the blood contains elements which bring about coagulation and healing.

And perhaps because Plath dedicated this poem to her newest baby-sitter, “the

prettiest, sweetest local children's nurse" Susan O'Neil Roe¹⁶, this element of story-telling runs throughout the poem, although adventure stories about scalped pilgrims and Kamikaze assassins are hardly suitable for babies.

There is a suggestion of a turning wheel, too, in the energy of the poem: the flow of events; the global imagery which also moves through time (American pilgrims, Indian scalping; a Japanese assassin; the white-hooded Ku Klux Klan; a Russian babushka¹⁷); dizziness; and the "Mill of silence" (whatever its meaning); all convey dynamic power.

Beyond that, however, there is little obvious connection with the deeper meaning of the card at this step of the Tarot journey.

For the Tarot initiate who has been taken down into the darkness of the material world (and of the subconscious) and has now completed the 'Second Initiation'¹⁸, the descent is over and the ascent towards the Wisdom of the Mysteries is about to begin. Questions about the self must be answered (as the sphinx-like figure above the wheel on the card indicates); and insight must be gained so that the initiate can live in harmony with the world's energies.

Surprisingly, Rákóczi's disapproving comment about heretical teachings in which "The body and soul had to be, as it were, slain and desecrated, or at least soiled and scarred, before contrition and absolution were of any value"¹⁹, might be linked to the "tarnished" bandages and to "Dirty girl/ Thumb stump" in Plath's poem.

The sphynx's sword, too, suggests that some sacrifice must be made. But is the sliced off tip of a thumb enough of a sacrifice? The speaker certainly likens it to a trepanned head, and this is usually a procedure which a surgeon undertakes in order to effect healing.

Also, the metaphorical carpet of blood onto which the speaker in the poem steps, comes "straight from the heart"; her "thin/ Papery feeling" might be dizziness due to the accident or it might suggest the leaving behind of material attachments; and the "Mill of silence" is linked with the circling gauze bandage on the "balled pulp" of the thumb but it could also connect the speaker's heart to her inner world and, so, to the cycles of time, the cosmic wheel, the whirlings of the heavens.

All these things may suggest some deeper meaning to Plath's poem. However, given the euphoric tone of the letter she wrote to her mother the day before she wrote the poem, and her plea for forgiveness for her "grumpy, sick letters of the last week", 'Cut' may simply reflect an actual change in her fortunes and moods. Both possibilities, of course, could be true.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, p.40.

2. Kukil, K (ed.), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 29 March 1958. p.599.
3. Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, p.43. Saint Sara (Sara–la–Kali) is venerated at the thirteenth century church of Saintes Maries–de–la–Mer, Isle de la Camargue, France. Her festival days, 24-25 May, are celebrated each year and are attended by many Romany pilgrims.
4. Wallis Budge, E.A. *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol.1. Dover Publications, N.Y. 1969, pp.402-415.
5. A number of papyrus pictures show the hippopotamus being speared by the god Horus to protect Thoth. Yet, the animal was worshipped by the Egyptians and there was, in *The Book of Slaughter of the Hippopotamus*, a hippopotamus goddess, called Rertu, who was regarded as beneficent.
6. Hughes, T. 'Publishing Sylvia Plath', *Winter Pollen*, Faber, 1994, p.166.
7. Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, p.43.
8. Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, p.44.
9. Stevenson, A. *Bitter Fame*, Viking, 1989, p. 268.
10. Plath, S. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Faber, 1979, pp.26 and 33.
11. Kukil, K. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p.522.
12. Plath interviewed by Peter Orr of the British Council, 30 October, 1962. This interview is available on the internet.
13. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', *Winter Pollen*, Faber, 1994, p.187.
14. Plath, S. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, pp.26-7.
15. With only the thumb on one hand exposed from a clenched fist, the mother asks: "Where is Thumbkin? Where is Thumbkin? Here I am." (exposes thumb the other hand). "Here I am. How are you this morning?" (bowing the first thumb). "Very well I thank you" (bowing the other thumb). "Run away. Run away" (conceals each thumb in turn). The game is repeated for 'Pointer', 'Tallman', 'Ringman' and 'Smallman'.
16. Plath, A. (ed.), *Letters Home*, Faber, 1976, pp.474-5. Letter dated 23 October, 1962.
17. 'Babushka' is the name for an elderly Russian peasant woman; and for the folded headscarf which she wears and which, in the poem, is likened to the bandage on the thumb/head.

18. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.47.

19. Rákóczi also links the Wheel of Fortune card with the Wheel of Law. The Painted Caravan, p.45.

Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot text and illustrations. © Ann Skea 12 January 2013. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go To Next Chapter

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot (3)

'Tulips', 'A Secret', 'The Jailer', 'Cut'.

© Ann Skea.

Chariotstrip

"Tulips" (dated 18 March 1961), is paired with The Chariot, card 7, and, as with earlier poems, it seems to have little relationship to the usual divinatory readings of this card, which are to do with self-confidence, success, excitement and balance.

In spite of this, Plath's poem describes perfectly the state of an initiate who has just been reborn and is ready to begin the next part of the Tarot journey. Such an initiate has, according to Rákóczi, "suffered the loss of one half of himself, the youthful beloved", and must now "follow the chariot of Pluto into the next world and search for that which was lost in order that the two halves may be reunited and a balance restored"¹.

The speaker in 'Tulips' is like one who has been reborn into a sort of limbo. What she describes is exactly the loss of self – the loss of persona – which marks the start of the second stage of the Tarot journey. She is "nobody". She has given away her name and her "day-clothes", as if giving up her everyday identity. She has given away her "history" and her "body"; has "lost herself" (her self), and is learning peacefulness in a place where everything is wintry, "white" and "quiet". And she has become "just an eye" observing the passing figures of nurses.

The eye/she, is, like a new-born initiate, a "stupid pupil", a passive observer. She is "sick of baggage" – which is linked in her mind and in the lines of the poem, with her "husband and child", and "family": and the ambiguity of "sick with" encompasses 'tired of' and 'made sick by' these emotional ties. Now, she has been "swabbed" clean of her "loving associations" and of all material things and this bathing by the impersonal nurses is like a baptism: it washes away her old life and it leaves her "pure", "empty", peaceful and "free": in a state such as "the dead close on".

This giving up and washing away of all physical, material and emotional attachments, and the religious imagery of the poem, all suggest the death-rebirth of an initiate.

Now, gradually, her re-emergence into life is prompted by the tulips and described, first, through their assault on her senses – sight, sound, weight and touch. She is dragged from her stasis and contentment into a new and terrifying place where she – “flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow” – stands as nothing, faceless and effaced, before two dangerous and terrifying powers of nature: the sun; and the earth-grown tulips, which seem to her to be both oxygen-eating plants and dangerous, voracious animals.

Starting with her feelings of humiliation and fear, the tulips gradually drag the speaker into awareness of the turbulent world around her: they “concentrate” her attention so that, in the final images of the poem, she becomes conscious of the beating of her heart, and links her heart and the flowers with love. Both hearts and love are potent religious and spiritual symbols, appropriate to a spiritual quest.

Finally, with heart and mind reunited, salt water, “like the sea” which is the traditional symbol of the subconscious, provides the speaker with a first taste of her connection with some as yet distant place where wholeness and health can be attained. In terms of the Tarot journey, now, when the initiate must “follow the chariot of Pluto” (who is the god of the underworld and who in Jungian psychology presides over the subconscious), the speaker’s new awareness would indicate that the examination of her inner self (her buried shadow-self; her subconscious; her heart and soul) is about to begin.

Yet, however appropriate this poem is for this stage of the Tarot journey, it seems unlikely that Plath was using the Tarot to shape it when she wrote it. It was written just nineteen days after she had her appendectomy (28 February 1961) and it is a superb and realistic evocation of the dream-like, disoriented state of someone recovering, in hospital, from an anaesthetic. It is interesting to compare it with her journal entry for 27 February 1961, ‘In Hospital’, at which time she was “still whole” and very observant. She wrote “This is a religious establishment, great cleansings take place”; and, of the flowers: “a helpful inmate...brings the flowers back, sweet-lipped as children. All night they’ve been breathing in the hall...”².

Clearly, the religious elements of the poem were already there in her mind when she wrote it, as was the personification of the flowers. This does not mean, however, that Plath did not see how absolutely right this poem was for pairing with The Chariot card when she ordered her Ariel manuscripts.

Unlike ‘Tulips’, the imagery of ‘A Secret’ (dated 10 October 1962) has no coherence. In quick succession we have a policeman, a one-eyed person, an African Giraffe and a hippopotamus (of an extinct species), a brandy finger (like a brandy-snap biscuit) “roosting and cooing”, a grotesque, bastard baby in a bureau drawer or in a stoppered bottle of stout, mayhem in the Place de la Concorde, and a stumbling, speaking, dwarf baby with a knife in its back. The only thing which holds this poem together is the bitter sarcasm of the speaker; and a dirty secret which must be levered out with a knife.

Justicestrip

Nothing in all this suggests the card of Justice, which stands for balance, stability,

discernment and tranquillity. Nor, even if the card and its meaning were reversed, does this provide any enlightenment about the imagery in the poem, although it is suitably chaotic.

Rákóczi writes that this card represents “the judgment of Osiris, where the soul of the initiate is being weighed”. He mentions “more licentious sects” where “we have the exaltation of the prostitute as a saint and the saint treated as one who is impure”; and he notes that Gypsies “call this card the Magdalene card” and place it under the patronage of Sara, the Negress saint of the Romany³.

Perhaps, in the poem, there is an element of the figure of Justice being treated as one who is impure. And perhaps the “Eden greenery”, the “African giraffe”, the “Moroccan hippopotamus” and the “jungle gutturals” are associated with Black Sara, who, according to some accounts, was an Egyptian Abbess of a convent in Libya, North Africa. But this is mere speculation.

Given the stage of the Tarot journey that this poem should reflect, a stage at which the initiate must begin the journey through the underworld of their own subconscious and examine their inner self, let me offer three pictures which may throw some light on Plath’s imagery. All three are taken from Egyptian papyri of The Book of the Dead, which illustrate the place of judgment in which the heart of each newly deceased person is weighed in a balance which is supervised by the god, Thoth (Tehuti).

Thoth

Thoth is the god whose will and power keep the forces of heaven and earth in equilibrium; he is the scribe of the gods and the guardian of the gates of the underworld. Although he is a Moon god, he is known as the ‘Eye of Ra’ – the mind, reason, and understanding of the great Sun god Ra. And he is also “the great god of words”, who can teach the words of power and “the manner in which to utter them”⁴. He is believed to be the originator of the Tarot.

My first picture of Thoth shows him in his typical form as a human with the head of an ibis. Half his body is blue, and blue is the colour which the Egyptians usually associated with him, although he is often shown as other colours. He stands, in profile, with one foot forward and his left arm raised, “holding up one palm” like a policeman.

The second picture shows Thoth standing before the scales on which the heart of the deceased is being weighed against a feather. He has his stylus and a papyrus tablet in his hands ready to record the result. Behind him is a creature – part lion, part crocodile, part hippopotamus – waiting to devour those who fail the test. All these animals, especially the hippopotamus, were regarded as fiends of the dark which must be overcome⁵. No giraffes are mentioned in the Egyptian texts.

The third picture shows Thoth seated in a boat with his associate the ape (a form of Thoth as Lord of Divine Words) who holds before him the Utchat – the Right Eye of Ra (the sun) – which he is ferrying through the underworld. On the prow of the boat,

is Thoth's own Utchat – the Left Eye of Ra – which represents the moon. So Thoth, seen in profile in this picture, has two eyes: all the other figures in the Book of the Dead are similarly seen in profile and have only one eye.

Perhaps this is taking speculation too far. Being one-eyed, of course, is also a common metaphor for not seeing things clearly or for seeing only one side of something.

I offer one more suggestion: Since what is necessary at this stage is self-examination, the speaker in the poem may be a divided self, one half policeman interrogator, the other, the interrogated. This may explain why, for most of the poem, it is unclear who is speaking and who is being spoken to. Only when lines are in inverted commas does it appear that two people are present, as in lines 33 and 34: "Do away with it altogether." / "No, no, it is happy there". These lines, however, might still be a single speaker's sarcastic mimicry of an authoritarian figure.

In the end, none of the above suggestions fully resolve the puzzles of this poem. This may be one reason why Ted Hughes chose not to include it when he edited the first publication of *Ariel*, although it could also fit into what Hughes called "the more openly vicious" poems, which he left out⁶.

Hermitstrip

'The Jailor' (dated 17 October 1962) is the ninth poem of the *Ariel* sequence and should represent the Tarot Hermit (card 9).

Nothing about this poem conforms to any representation of the Hermit in Tarot teachings. He is one who carries a light in the underworld. He is 'The Sage', the 'Old One' who represents "prudence, truthfulness, justice, wisdom, courage, patience and the like"⁷, and he is regarded as the initiate's guide to inner wisdom and self-awareness.

In the place of Justice, the light of the Law shone upon the initiate, whose sins are forgiven but must be paid for, and Rákóczi writes that this card "corresponds to the Lord of Karma who allocates the rewards and penalties after the weighing of the lost soul"⁸.

In reverse, the Hermit's energies are said to represent regression, retreat, introspection, and a turning away from the light and from guidance. This is very different to regarding the Hermit as a jailor.

There is certainly punishment in Plath's poem, but there is no sign of the Tarot Hermit. Nor is there any indication that her speaker is taking a step forward in the initiatory journey. The jailor, here, is a torturer: one who hurts the speaker for her dreams "of someone else entirely". He coldly inflicts obscene and horrific punishments. He is associated, too, with both the dark and the light; and his existence depends on the speaker's presence. Three times in the final stanza his needs are questioned; and three times his need for his victim is specified. This is no ordinary lawful punishment for sins.

Anne Stevenson, in *Bitter Fame*, regarded this poem as part of Plath's exorcism of her inner demons and she suggested that it "attacked her longing for her husband"⁹. Yet, it could equally well represent Plath's confrontation with "Johnny Panic" – "The Great Dream-Maker himself" – whose motto is "Perfect fear casteth out all else", and whose "love is the twenty-storey leap, the rope at the throat, the knife in his heart"¹⁰. Plath's story, 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams' reflects much of her own experience with paralysing fear. "Paralysis again", she wrote in her journal on 4 November 1959, "I wonder, will I ever be rid of Johnny Panic?"¹¹.

Now, through the speaker in her poem, in the last two stanzas Plath "imagines" him "impotent as thunder"; imagines him "dead and away"; and, with the three repetitions of 'Do without' in the final stanza (each in a separate line so that it can be heard as a command) and the three repetitions of 'do' in the final line, she performs a magical ritual of banishment:

"Do without fevers to eat"

...

"Do without eyes to knife"

...

"Do, do, do without me"

In the incantatory rhythms of the poem if spoken aloud, as Plath said all the *Ariel* poems were as she wrote them¹², and with its triple repetitions, occultists would consider this to be powerful magic.

This has nothing to do with Tarot: but a great deal to do with what Ted Hughes called Plath's constant and continuing work towards "resurrection of self" and the defeat of "everything that had held her in the grave for 'three days', The Other". In each poem in *Ariel*, in Hughes' words, "the terror is encountered head on, and the angel [The Other] is mastered and brought to terms"¹³.

In the light of these comments, 'The Jailer' does not represent a specific step in a Tarot journey but can be seen as self-administered psychotherapy of the sort provided by the "psyche-doctors" for Harry Bilbo and other Johnny Panic "converts" in Plath's story, 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams'¹⁴.

Wheel of Fortunestrip

'Cut' (dated 24 October 1962) occupies the position of card 10, The Wheel of Fortune. Traditionally, this card represents change, chance, transformation: it is the Wheel of Life, Fate, and its energies are those of an inevitable, dynamic process which is beyond our control.

At first reading, apart from the accidental cutting of the speaker's thumb, there seems little to relate Plath's poem to the traditional meanings of this card.

Certainly, there is a change of mood compared to the previous poem. The speaker in the poem is excited, thrilled by the sudden accident which has occurred. This is "a

celebration". And she is playful, too, giving her thumb an identity of its own which is reminiscent of Thumbkin in the children's finger-play game¹⁵. Even the "million soldiers", the "Redcoats" which "run" from "the gap", are more suggestive of 'all the King's horses and all the King's men' of nursery rhyme fame than of red blood cells flowing from a cut. Her query: "whose side are they on?" encompasses the Redcoat soldiers and the physical response to a cut – a flow of blood seems to endanger life and yet the blood contains elements which bring about coagulation and healing.

And perhaps because Plath dedicated this poem to her newest baby-sitter, "the prettiest, sweetest local children's nurse" Susan O'Neil Roe¹⁶, this element of story-telling runs throughout the poem, although adventure stories about scalped pilgrims and Kamikaze assassins are hardly suitable for babies.

There is a suggestion of a turning wheel, too, in the energy of the poem: the flow of events; the global imagery which also moves through time (American pilgrims, Indian scalping; a Japanese assassin; the white-hooded Ku Klux Klan; a Russian babushka¹⁷); dizziness; and the "Mill of silence" (whatever its meaning); all convey dynamic power.

Beyond that, however, there is little obvious connection with the deeper meaning of the card at this step of the Tarot journey.

For the Tarot initiate who has been taken down into the darkness of the material world (and of the subconscious) and has now completed the 'Second Initiation'¹⁸, the descent is over and the ascent towards the Wisdom of the Mysteries is about to begin. Questions about the self must be answered (as the sphinx-like figure above the wheel on the card indicates); and insight must be gained so that the initiate can live in harmony with the world's energies.

Surprisingly, Rákóczi's disapproving comment about heretical teachings in which "The body and soul had to be, as it were, slain and desecrated, or at least soiled and scarred, before contrition and absolution were of any value"¹⁹, might be linked to the "tarnished" bandages and to "Dirty girl/ Thumb stump" in Plath's poem.

The sphynx's sword, too, suggests that some sacrifice must be made. But is the sliced off tip of a thumb enough of a sacrifice? The speaker certainly likens it to a trepanned head, and this is usually a procedure which a surgeon undertakes in order to effect healing.

Also, the metaphorical carpet of blood onto which the speaker in the poem steps, comes "straight from the heart"; her "thin/ Papery feeling" might be dizziness due to the accident or it might suggest the leaving behind of material attachments; and the "Mill of silence" is linked with the circling gauze bandage on the "balled pulp" of the thumb but it could also connect the speaker's heart to her inner world and, so, to the cycles of time, the cosmic wheel, the whirlings of the heavens.

All these things may suggest some deeper meaning to Plath's poem. However, given the euphoric tone of the letter she wrote to her mother the day before she wrote the poem, and her plea for forgiveness for her "grumpy, sick letters of the last week", 'Cut' may simply reflect an actual change in her fortunes and moods. Both possibilities, of course, could be true.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.40.
2. Kukil, K (ed.), The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 29 March 1958. p.599.
3. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.43. Saint Sara (Sara-la-Kali) is venerated at the thirteenth century church of Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer, Isle de la Camargue, France. Her festival days, 24-25 May, are celebrated each year and are attended by many Romany pilgrims.
4. Wallis Budge, E.A. The Gods of the Egyptians, Vol.1. Dover Publications, N.Y. 1969, pp.402-415.
5. A number of papyrus pictures show the hippopotamus being speared by the god Horus to protect Thoth. Yet, the animal was worshipped by the Egyptians and there was, in The Book of Slaughter of the Hippopotamus, a hippopotamus goddess, called Rertu, who was regarded as beneficent.
6. Hughes, T. 'Publishing Sylvia Plath', Winter Pollen, Faber, 1994, p.166.
7. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.43.
8. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.44.
9. Stevenson, A. Bitter Fame, Viking, 1989, p. 268.
10. Plath, S. Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, Faber, 1979, pp.26 and 33.
11. Kukil, K. The Journals of Sylvia Plath, p.522.
12. Plath interviewed by Peter Orr of the British Council, 30 October, 1962. This interview is available on the internet.
13. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', Winter Pollen, Faber, 1994, p.187.
14. Plath, S. Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, pp.26-7.
15. With only the thumb on one hand exposed from a clenched fist, the mother asks: "Where is Thumbkin? Where is Thumbkin? Here I am." (exposes thumb the other hand).

“Here I am. How are you this morning?” (bowing the first thumb). “Very well I thank you” (bowing the other thumb). “Run away. Run away” (conceals each thumb in turn). The game is repeated for ‘Pointer’, ‘Tallman’, ‘Ringman’ and ‘Smallman’.

16. Plath, A. (ed.), *Letters Home*, Faber, 1976, pp.474-5. Letter dated 23 October, 1962.

17. ‘Babushka’ is the name for an elderly Russian peasant woman; and for the folded headscarf which she wears and which, in the poem, is likened to the bandage on the thumb/head.

18. Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, p.47.

19. Rákóczi also links the Wheel of Fortune card with the Wheel of Law. *The Painted Caravan*, p.45.

Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* and the Tarot text and illustrations. © Ann Skea 12 January 2013. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Go To Next Chapter](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* and the Tarot (4)

‘Elm’, ‘The Night Dances’ ‘The Detective’.

© Ann Skea.

Elm

It is impossible to write about the next poem, ‘Elm’ (dated 12-19 April 1962), without referring to what Ted Hughes wrote about it. After tracing in Plath’s journals her ‘Jungian’ drama of “alchemical individuation of self”, which “began with a ‘death’, which was followed by a long ‘gestation’ or ‘regeneration’, which in turn would ultimately require a ‘birth’ or ‘rebirth’”, Hughes describes how she “started a poem about a giant wych elm that overshadowed the yard of her home”¹.

For him, the drafts of the poem show Plath’s struggle to control the poem, to force it into order when “the lines try to take the law into their own hands”. Ultimately, “it burst all her restraints and she let it go”, and this was the instant when, according to Hughes, “the Ariel voice emerged, in full, out of the tree”, and “from that day on it never faltered again”.

Hughes saw ‘Elm’ as a poem of ‘birth’, and also as the poem which marked Plath’s confrontation through the dramatic speech of Ariel, with all that threatened “the nucleus of self” which she had for so long been “nursing and repairing”².

Elms, in British and North-European folk-lore, have many magical associations with birth and death and Plath almost certainly knew about these, if not through her own reading, then through her husband’s extensive knowledge of those subjects. Elms are believed to be a bridge between the world of the dead and that of the living and, partly

for this reason, elm-wood is traditionally used for coffins. Elm trees are also associated with elves, and the elf-mounds on which they grow are a source of inspiration and communication with the spirits of the dead.

The elm trees at Court Green grew on just such an elf-mound³, and in Hughes' poem, 'The Afterbirth'⁴, he writes that after burying the afterbirth of their newborn son in "a motherly hump of ancient Briton/ under the elms", a hare – "a witchy familiar" (and a form of the Goddess) – "came hobbling down from under the elms/ into our yard".

Elm, too, was the wood from which Hughes made Plath's writing desk. On 15 September 1961, she wrote to her mother that Warren, her brother, was helping Hughes to sand "an immense elm plank which will make me my first real capacious writing table"⁵. In Hughes' poem 'The Table'⁶, he describes this plank as "Rough-cut for coffin timber", and he depicts Plath "Bent over it, euphoric", and able to "divine in the elm" the words which would open "a door / downwards into [her] Daddy's grave".

So, the elm in Plath's poem has associations with the Goddess, with magic, with the spirit world and with death and rebirth, regardless of any link which the poem might have with the Tarot.

'Elm' is a powerful, sensuous poem, full of the sounds, shape and movement of an ancient tree on a windy, moonlit, Autumn night. What makes it an Ariel poem is not just the speaker's 'voice', but the witchy "madness" and the atmosphere of fear engendered by words like "atrocities", "poisons" and "violence"; by the "merciless", scathing presence of the jealous, "barren" moon; by the terrifying, malign, feathered "dark thing" that sleeps in it; and by the "murderous" face which "petrifies the will".

Although the speaker is reporting the elm's speech, the identification between speaker and tree begins at line 27: "How your bad dreams possess and endow me". From then on, the malignity, thoughts and speech belong to both. It is hard, therefore, to see the magical, triple repetition of "that kill" in the final line as any kind of banishing, as the triple repetitions were in 'The Jailer'. It seems, instead, to be an affirmation – and a recognition – of the "isolate, slow faults" which have so agitated and poisoned the speaker's heart and mind.

Interestingly, Plath wrote "Jealousy" and "Stigma (of selfhood)" on a manuscript draft of 'Elm'⁷, and jealousy may well be the dark malignity which sleeps in her speaker and conjures images of irretrievable loved ones to agitate her heart and petrify her will. Jealousy, too, may be one of the "isolate, slow faults" – a stain, a "Stigma (of selfhood)" which will kill rather than heal⁸. Plath certainly recognised jealousy in her own personality. She diagnosed it in herself quite often in her journals, and on 22 October 1959, she wrote in a journal note fragment: "Ideas are tyrants to me: the ideas of my jealous, queen-bitch super ego".

Again, it seems that in 'Elm' Plath was recognizing and facing her inner demons.

Strengthstrip

In terms of the Tarot, 'Elm' is aligned with Strength (card 11), which depicts a woman holding open the jaws of a fearsome beast, which may be a wolf or a lion. One common occult interpretation of this card is that it symbolizes the female essence controlling animal passions. And that seems appropriate to a poem in which Plath has the strength to face and control (within the poem) a destructive emotion like jealousy. But she seems to have been facing these same demons in 'Event', which was written a month later (dated 21 May 1962), so why might she choose 'Elm' to occupy this position in her Ariel sequence rather than 'Event'?

Rákóczi suggests that the card represents "the triumph of spirit over matter", and he describes the initiate at this stage as having "passed through the fires of unbridled passion, then through extreme asceticism"⁹. This does not seem to have much relevance to either 'Elm' or 'Event'. However, there is a curious connection in 'Elm' between the magical personification of the tree, the elements and the moon, and Rákóczi's description of the teachings of so-called 'Heresy Schools', where, he writes, the initiate must, at this stage, "have the power to draw from the depths of the hidden forces of the earth, the nature Gods and their elementals".

If Sylvia was using *The Painted Caravan* to order the Ariel poems some time after they were written, then 'Elm' may well have seemed to best fit the above interpretations of the card of Strength. And, since the energies involved were contained within her carefully crafted poem, she may have felt she could safely ignore Rákóczi's warning that "opening the dark recesses of nature", in the way that the Heresy Schools teach, is extremely dangerous unless attempted for "the highest ends" and under the guidance of "a noble and genuine Master"¹⁰.

The poem, however, is still charged with those energies. And the feelings of fear, loss and inadequacy which permeate the last five stanzas culminate in the triple repetition – "that kill, that kill, that kill" – which has great destructive power.

Perhaps as an antidote to this, Plath chose the calm and moving blessings of 'The Night Dances'¹¹ (dated 4-6 November 1962) as the next poem in her book. Yet, even this poem is pervaded by images of loss and emptiness: nothing, however beautiful, lasts, except perhaps in memories and in the poem which contains them.

Yet, the ambiguity of 'surely' in line six expresses, in the context of the lines immediately before and after it, the speaker's hopeful belief that the "pure leaps and spirals" of the child's dance will travel the world forever. And at the same time, isolated by the poet in a single line – "Surely they will travel" – it also makes a statement of certainty that surely (certainly, safely) they will do so.

Almost all the things the speaker mentions in the poem are abstract or ephemeral: "a smile", a baby's dancing, his "small breath" with its delicate smell of "drenched grass", the "mathematics" of his "leaps and spirals" which "flake off" into cosmic space, even the snowflakes and their touch on eyes, lips and hair, melt and are "nowhere".

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zantedeschia>https://www.ehow.com/about_5426893_tiger-lilies.html

The beauties associated with the child are linked by the speaker with “lilies, lilies”: the calla lily, with its single white spathe folded in on itself like “cold folds of ego”; and the tiger lily, “embellishing itself” with dark spots on its hot orange spread of petals. Both are ephemeral; but the flesh of lilies is un-reproductive – it literally “bears no relation”. And the beauty of the child’s dancing, which is a spontaneous, selfless “gift” given by the child and taken and treasured by his mother, also “bears no relation” to the beauty of the lilies, which is only an enticement, a means of attracting pollinators to their reproductive parts.

The ambiguities and the dualities throughout this poem, are remarkable. The poem is written in couplets. There is ambiguity in words and phrases: even the title encompasses both the child’s dancing and the cosmic dance of the leaps and spirals which travel the world and fall, like planets, in the night. The repetition of ‘lilies’ is further defined by the mention of two different species with completely different symbolism: the calla lily is a symbol of purity and of the Virgin Mary; and the tiger lily is linked with the big cats of the goddess in her most fecund and predatory form.

The focus of the poem moves between the child in the cot and the speaker (or mother). There is warmth and coldness, movement and stillness, remembering and “amnesia”, earth and heaven.

Yet, all the beauties and dichotomies in the poem end up, in the final, solitary word of the poem, “Nowhere”. So, the speaker, and perhaps the poet, are left facing a void.

Hanged Manstrip

What, then, has all this to do with ‘The Hanged Man’ (card 12), with which it would be linked in the Tarot journey?

The figure on this card, hung upside-down by one foot from a branch, is linked in mythology with Attis and with Odin, and, so, to sacrifice in the pursuit of fertility and occult wisdom. The traditional divinatory meaning of this card is of a time of suspension and voluntary sacrifice in the transition from the worldly to the spiritual world.

There is no sacrifice in Plath’s poem. But the mood of the speaker is one of quiet reflection and reverie, which does suggest a suspension in time. In mythology, too, all dualities belong to the two-headed god Janus, the God of the Threshold. He looks to the past and to the future, suspended in time like the Hanged Man, and like Plath’s speaker.

In addition to this, Rákóczi, in *The Painted Caravan*, writes that the initiate is now on a threshold below which there seems to be a “yawning abyss”, “a void”, a “great negation” which is the negative aspect of God¹², and which must be crossed before the journey can continue. This threshold, too, on the brink of negativity and emptiness, seems to be

reflected in Plath's poem.

So, 'The Night Dances' does beautifully express some of the important symbolic meanings of The Hanged Man, and it could well have been written with this particular Tarot card in mind.

Deathstrip

The next poem, 'The Detective' (dated 1 October 1962), was written a month before 'The Night Dances', and it marks a harsh return in the Ariel sequence to unpleasant, deathly imagery and Plath's cold, vituperative Ariel 'voice'. And with its death valley, its "killer", its "poisons" and its horrific punishments, this poem could well be said to describe Death, the card with which its position in the Ariel sequence would align it.

Death (card 13), in the traditional Tarot de Marseille deck and in The Painted Caravan, is shown as a skeleton with a scythe, on ground which is strewn with dismembered body parts. Unlike Plath's poem, however, there are signs of regeneration, and green sprouting plants grow from the dark soil and, sometimes, from bones and severed limbs.

In Tarot tradition, the skeleton symbolizes the death of all that is mortal and finite but, as the plants on the card indicate, this is not an end but a necessary step on the journey to rebirth. Between death and rebirth, the initiate's spirit must enter the void with only intuition, instinct and feeling for guidance. This, as Rákóczi writes "is the dark night of the soul", in which there seems to be nothing beyond "the painted curtain of the material world" which has now been left behind.

Plath's poem, however, is firmly set in the material world. There is "the smell of polish", "plush carpets", a "wireless", cups, sunlight, details of landscape, cows, and a very graphic and physical dismembering of the body before "vaporization".

Nor is there any suggestion in the poem of the guiding power of instinct, intuition or feeling. Instead, the speaker is clinical and analytical, and the only possible guide is the unlikely "Watson".

Yet, "no one is dead" and "there is no body". Both of which statements suggest that the "case without a body" could be the disembodied soul or spirit of the initiate. Although it could, of course, simply refer to the mystery which the detective must solve, and/or to the house from which the body is said to be missing but in which the "she" of the poem's first line is "arranging cups" or is "at the window, listening".

Death certainly pervades this poem and in spite of the 'detective' speaker's rational, analytical self-control, by the end of his nightmare description of dismemberment the moon's dark, malign influence hangs over everything. It smiles at the cruel punishments and at the skeletal children; and ultimately, its phosphorescent glow, lighting a single ominous "crow" in a tree, is all that remains.

The whole mystery proposed by this poem is designed to suggest that the speaker is a detective, and the mention of Watson suggests it is Sherlock Holmes. But in terms of an initiatory journey, the search by the Goddess Isis for the dismembered body of her husband/brother, Osiris, would be more appropriate, since this presages rebirth and is more closely linked to the regenerative symbols on the card.

Curiously, Rákóczi links Isis and Osiris with the previous card in the Tarot sequence, The Hanged Man. And not only does his description of the search by Isis for the missing body parts of her slain and dismembered husband reflect the mystery and some of the imagery in 'The Detective', there is also a reference to the empty sarcophagus (like a "case without a body" in Plath's poem) in which Osiris's body parts will be reassembled ready for rebirth.

To connect 'The Detective' with either Death or The Hanged Man Tarot card on such flimsy evidence is, I think, to be like a drowning man clutching at straws. Yet the possibility remains that Rákóczi's reference to the story of Isis and Osiris, which, perhaps confusingly, begins on a page opposite the picture of the Hanged Man card and is continued on the page opposite the picture of the Death card, may have influenced Plath's positioning of 'The Detective' in her Ariel poems.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath and Her Journals', Winter Pollen, pp.178-188.
2. Hughes, T. 'Collecting Sylvia Plath', Winter Pollen, p.179.
3. "The house in Devon was overshadowed by a giant wych-elm, flanked by two others in a single mass, growing on the shoulder of a moated prehistoric mound": Ted Hughes' note for this poem in Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, p.291. A photograph of the elms can be seen in a Crowther_Steinberg.pdf 'These Ghostly Archives 3'. by Gail Crowther and Peter K.Steinberg, Plath Profiles 4, Summer 2011, p.134.
4. Hughes, T. Birthday Letters, Faber, 1998, p.131.
5. Plath, A (ed.), Sylvia Plath: Letters Home, p.429.
6. Hughes, T. Birthday Letters, p.138-9.
7. Sevenson, A. Bitter Fame, p.221.
8. 'Selfhood' in Jungian psychology is the goal of wholeness which requires a balance between opposing forces of personality.
9. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p. 47.
10. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p. 48.

11. "A revolving dance which her baby son performed at night in his crib": Ted Hughes' note to this poem in Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, p.294.

12. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.49.

Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot text and illustrations. © Ann Skea 12 January 2013. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go To Next Chapter

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot (5)

'Ariel', 'Death & Co.' 'Magi', 'Lesbos'.

© Ann Skea.

In the Tarot journey, after 'the dark night of the Soul' and the card of Death, comes the release and subsequent tempering of the Spirit. The three necessary parts of the human journey – the progressive development of Body, Soul and Spirit - can be seen particularly clearly in an alternative layout of the Tarot cards which consist of three lines of seven cards¹

'Ariel' (dated 27 Oct. 1962), which is the next poem in Plath's sequence was written more than three weeks after 'The Detective' and it would be aligned with the card of Temperance in the Tarot journey.

Temperance cardstrip

The meanings traditionally given to this card are of the mingling of all elements, harmony, balance, self-control and the completion of a journey. All these meanings are also attributed to the card of The Chariot and the card of The World which lie above and below it respectively in the 3/7 layout.

'Ariel' which was titled 'The Horse' when it was first published is, according to Plath's note² and to that of Ted Hughes in the Collected Poems³, about a ride on a horse called 'Ariel' of which Plath was "especially fond"⁴.

Elsewhere⁵, Ted Hughes says that the poem "describes and almost apotheosizes a dawn ride, on Dartmoor". He describes the poem as "the quintessential Plath Ariel poem in that the speaker, the I, hurls herself free from all earthly confinements and aims herself and her horse – as the poems says, 'suicidal' directly into the red, rising sun". And he notes the "overt sense" of "liberation from earthly restraints (earthly life)... rebirth into something greater and more glorious... – a spiritual rebirth perhaps".

In this sense, the poem is exactly right for the card of Temperance. It also conveys a sense of the presence of "something else", which "hauls" the speaker free of the earth – free of "hooks", "shadows" and "dead hands, dead stringencies". That inexplicable "something else" is present on the card in the magically suspended stream of water

which flows continuously between pitchers held in either hand of an angelic figure. That “something else” may be poetic inspiration. And it may be Mercurial or Angelic assistance, since the figure on the card is traditionally identified as the Rainbow Goddess, Iris, who, like Mercury, is messenger of the gods, but who may also be identified as Ariel, the Angelic Prince who, in magic, has dominion over the elements and the creative forces.

Rákóczi writes that heretical sects taught that this stage of the journey represents “the transmutation of the base and corrupt into the noble and whole that had to be achieved through actual experience”⁶.

Plath was certainly writing from actual experience, although her own precipitous gallop was on the runaway horse, Sam, when she was at Cambridge a few years earlier⁷. Her poem moves from stasis to flight, from the “stringencies” of death and corruption to the purity of air and spirit. It combines the four elements - earth (in tor and furrow), air (in the flight of the arrow), water (in the dew and the seas) and fire (the sun). And the speaker’s balance and control of the horse, like Plath’s control of the poem, is precarious but sure. This is a superb evocation of a precipitous ride full of “striving ecstatic energy”⁸ but it is hardly temperate, in the usual meaning of the word.

Yet, the so-called ‘The Flight of the Arrow’, in Crowley’s Golden Dawn teachings, is associated with this card and is not only seen as “the mingling of contradictory elements in a cauldron”, which finds an echo in Plath’s sun, which is the “cauldron of morning”, but the arrow itself is described as “a symbol of directed Will”. Plath’s speaker, the ‘I’ of the poem, becomes the arrow, and it is her Will which makes her one with God’s lioness and which propels her suicidal “drive” into that cauldron⁹.

If Plath did use the card of Temperance as inspiration for ‘Ariel’, the intemperate, “suicidal” ending of the poem is not appropriate, for there is still more for the initiate to learn before the final state of harmony in The World (card 21) is reached. The newborn spirit has to be tempered, subjected to ordeal by fire and water, just as swords and knives are tempered to give them strength and flexibility. But this is not what happens in ‘Ariel’ and, in occult terms, Plath was attempting union with the energies of the Source in this poem, before she was fully prepared.

Ted Hughes, writing of the drafts of Plath’s ‘Sheep in Fog’, pointed out that this poem too, describes a horse-ride and that there are reflections of ‘Ariel’ in it, but he also pointed to Plath’s deleted lines in which “Ribs, spokes, a scrapped chariot” and “I am a scrapped chariot”, suggest the crashed chariot of “Phaeton, son of a mortal woman and Apollo (the god of the Sun and of Poetry)”. Extrapolation on these images and others, Hughes suggested that Plath sought to retain the “fierce inspiration and confidence” which had produced the Ariel poems, but that this “astonishing, sustained, soaring defiance”, this “drive” like her speaker in ‘Ariel’ “straight into God’s eye” had ultimately failed.

Years later, Hughes wrote that Plath’s real creation in the Ariel poems was “the inner

gestation and eventual birth of a new self-conquering self”; and that this was “the most important task a human being can undertake (and surely the most difficult)”. But he wrote, too, that “this new self, who could do so much, could not ultimately save her”, and, in a letter to Keith Sagar in 1981, he referred to Jung’s view that the moment of achieving such a rebirth was the most dangerous moment, when the person was most vulnerable¹⁰.

In ‘Ariel’, Plath was perhaps undertaking that dangerous ‘suicidal’ flight too soon after her rebirth. But, of course, if Plath was using the Tarot as a healing journey then ‘Ariel’ was not the final poem of that journey or of her Ariel sequence.

The next poem in the sequence, ‘Death & Co.’ (dated 12-14 Nov. 1961) was written just over two weeks later, but ten other Ariel poems had been written during that time.

On the typed duplicate of Plath’s contents page the handwritten title ‘Death & Co.’ has been inserted between ‘Ariel’ and ‘The Magi’ and it has been typed onto the original title page with the same insertion indicated by an arrow¹¹. Whether Plath was simply correcting an omission on these pages or whether these insertions indicate that the poem itself was also inserted amongst the manuscripts at a later date, it is impossible to tell.

If both title and poem were inserted, then the alignment of each of the poems with a particular Tarot card from this point on would change.

I will assume, for the moment, that only the title was inserted and that ‘Death & Co.’ was inspired by or written for the card of The Devil (card 15) which follows the Temperance card in the Tarot sequence, although the poem seems, initially, to have little to relate it to this card or to its position in the Tarot journey.

Devilstrip

The Devil represents the amoral, genderless, supremely powerful creative force – Pan Pangenitor, the all-begetter. It is shown in the traditional Tarot de Marseille deck and in The Painted Caravan, as a horned, goat-legged, bat-winged creature, and loosely tethered to the altar on which it squats are two similar but smaller and wingless beings. In some Tarot decks, these creatures are human – one male and one female – but always they share some of the Devil’s animal attributes; and always their demeanor is unconcerned, or even happy.

The symbolism of this imagery suggests that we are the offspring of this Devil – that we share some of its energies and that we are subject to its power. But the details of the image suggests also that either we are unknowingly enslaved, or we know of the bonds which bind us and choose to accept them, for the looseness of the bonds shows that we can throw them off.

Pan’s energies are lustful, vital, Mercurial energies. They are capricious and have no foresight or scruple. Allowed free reign, they have the power to transcend all limitations

and cause chaos and destruction. But they are also the energies of the light-bearer, Lucifer. And without them we are sterile.

The sexual energies are, of course, one expression of the Pan's generative powers and they are the cause of two kinds of bonds which may bind us. In excess and uncontrolled they can threaten the individual and society, but excessive suppression, either by personal inhibition or by Puritanical laws, can be equally destructive. The initiates' task is to learn to control and use this creative spirit. Only then can they free themselves of the bonds of excess or suppression which tether them to the altar of The Devil.

Sexual energies, however, are not the only creative energies. Plath, whose whole concern in *Ariel* was to free the creative energies which inspired her, seems, in 'Death & Co.', to have intuited a poetic meaning to this card. 'Thalidomide', 'Barren Woman' and, in particular, her earlier poem 'Stillborn' (June/July 1960) offer a clue: Plath's poems are her babies, without inspiration she is barren; influenced by the wrong energies, they may be deformed; without spirit, they are dead.

Plath's explanation of the poem was seemingly ingenuous and frank. She described it as being "about the double or schizophrenic nature of death – the marmorial coldness of Blake's death mask, say, hand in glove with the fearsome softness of worms, water, the other katabolists. I imagine these two aspects of death as two men, two business friends, who have come to call"¹².

There are many ways in which a poem might die. But in 'Death & Co.' there are two – "of course there are two".

One is "marmorial", restrained, cold and precise, like a death mask. Like a Classical Greek poem and like the poems in 'Stillborn', such poems are "proper in shape and number and every part", but "they are dead". They may be carefully composed and shaped, laid out like "sweet babies" in "a hospital icebox" but their "flutings" (like tunes from Pan's pipes, which are held in a Fool's hand on The Painted Caravan's image of The Devil) are those of their "Ionian/ Death-gowns", as if their music is constrained by these Greek garments in which they are clothed. And the two little feet of the babies in Plath's poem perhaps reflect the two feet of Classical Ionian poetry.

The other poetic death which Plath describes is that of the "long and plausible" poem, the poem written to please; the poem in which the poet is "masturbating a glitter" because he or she "wants to be loved". Plath's reference to the natural "katabolists" – "worms" and "water" – suggests nature poetry, but she associates it with a long-haired, obsequious "bastard" who is artificially stimulating, "masturbating", and wasting his natural creative energies.

The speaker in the poem is threatened by both forms of death but is "not his yet" and "does not stir" (a phrase which can mean both 'does not move' and 'is not moved'). And Plath ends the poem with a magical ritual in which she makes from the "frost" of the first kind of death "a flower", and from the "dew" of the second "a star": both of which are

images of generation and hope. She also ensures that the dead bell tolls twice – not for her, but for “Somebody” or, perhaps, for the two somebodies – “two business friends” whose business was to entice and devour her.

Poetic death, like actual physical death, destroys the creative Spirit. In ‘Death & Co.’, Blake’s death mask has eyes which are “lidded/ And balled”. He no longer has the spiritual vision which allowed him to free himself from the bonds of social conventions and religious dogma enough to proclaim that “The lust of the goat is the bounty of God”¹³, or to imagine the “immense world of delight” which is “closed” by our “senses five”¹⁴.

In Plath’s poem, however, her creative Spirit remains alive and free, and she expresses that creativity and freedom in her ‘Ariel’ voice.

The next poem, ‘Magi’ (undated but inserted between poems of the 16 and 17 Oct. 1960), however, is colder and full of abstracts. With its references to “The Good, and True”, “Evil” and “Love” (note the capitals), Plath’s “dull angels” are from the world of Plato and his Ideas: the world of Greek Socratic rationalism and objectivity from which Ionian poetry emerged and from which intuition and imagination, which nourish the creative spirit, were excluded.

Clearly such abstracts would threaten the new-born Ariel spirit, just as the “ethereal blanks” of these angelic beings’ “face-ovals” hover “Loveless as the multiplication table” around the six-month-old child in the poem.

Towerstrip

The Tarot card which is associated with this poem is The Tower (card 16). It depicts two figures falling to earth from the top of a lightning-struck, castellated tower, whilst hail or brimstone fall all around. Its usual divinatory meaning is catastrophe, sudden dramatic change, or revolution. At a deeper level, it can also symbolize the dramatic overturning of long-established beliefs as a result of new insight, and ‘the rending of the veil’ which reveals mystical knowledge and new spiritual and mystical awareness.

‘Magi’ has none of the dynamic power of the poems which Plath was writing in October and November 1962. Its whole tone is one of calm confidence and strength. It is impersonal and philosophical, quite unlike the dramatic energies depicted on The Tower card, although it does deal, in its own way, with part of the card’s meaning.

The dismissal of abstract, rationality in favour of nature and natural instincts is clear as Plath pits the strong physical presence of the child, secure on “all fours” and trusting its own instincts and feelings (nature not “theory”), against the “papery godfolk”. These “dull-angels” are not the ‘noble beings’ or ‘magicians’ which give the word ‘magi’ its meaning. They may be “the real thing, all right”, as the speaker says, but their gifts, “Salutary and pure” as they are, are deemed unacceptable here, their “whiteness” is compared unfavourably with “laundry” and their Love with mathematical tables. Finally, they are sarcastically sent off to the crib of “some lamp-headed Plato” who will better

appreciate their “merit”, so that the speaker’s “girl” may flourish.

There is no suggestion in the poem of The Tower’s connection with the lightning strike of divine inspiration or of any new mystical awareness. The title of the poem does call to mind the Magi – the three Kings – of the Christian nativity story, in which case, the child in the poem would be a symbol of divine, spiritual blessing and renewal. The emphasis in the poem, however, is on the banishing of these magi and their ‘gifts’ so that the child’s natural Spirit may flourish.

Ironically, Plath did not let her own Spirit have free rein in this poem: there is no catastrophic overthrow, no dramatic upheaval as there is in The Tower. Instead, she achieved the stripping away of a rational system of beliefs in a poem which is, itself, precise and purely rational. Nevertheless, the poem is about freeing the Spirit of a recently born child and, as such, it makes an appropriate choice for this stage of the Tarot journey.

The next poem, ‘Lesbos’ (dated 18 Oct. 1962), however, seems to have no obvious connection with the tempering of the Spirit. It was written before ‘Ariel’ and immediately after ‘Daddy’, ‘Medusa’ and ‘The Jailer’, all of which deal in a realistic way with people and events, rather than with anything abstract or mystical, and it shares the malign, vindictive energies which are apparent in these poems. Frieda Hughes cites ‘Lesbos’ as an example of one of her mother’s more ferocious and “lacerating poems”; one which her father left out of the British edition of Ariel, because “the couple so wickedly depicted” lived in Cornwall and would have been “much offended by its publication”¹⁵. As she has rightly said, ‘Lesbos’ “reads out loud in such a way that the energy gathers into a sort of whirlwind fist”¹⁶.

How, then, can this poem represent The Star (card 17), which is the next card on the Tarot journey and which, traditionally, is interpreted as the most beautiful, visionary card in the deck?

Starstrip

The Star means hope, intuition and inspiration, and it presages the end of the initiate’s journey and the attainment of wholeness. In some traditions, this card always has positive meaning, whatever its orientation¹⁷. And in traditions where a reversed meaning is given to the card when it is upside–down, this reversed orientation indicates misfortune, self–doubt, an unwillingness to accept one’s intuitions and, even, the misuse of psychic powers. None of this is apparent in ‘Lesbos’.

On The Star, a beautiful, naked woman kneels beside a pool into which she pours water from two pitchers. Above her head is a brilliant, eight–pointed star, which identifies her with Venus/Aphrodite, and also with the more ancient goddesses, Astarte and Innana. All these goddesses, are goddesses of love but also, in their darkest forms, they are known as ‘Goddess of War’, ‘The Hag’, and ‘Death Goddess’. With more stars falling around her, the woman kneels on the earth, demonstrating the goddess’s presence in the world, and she rests one foot in waters which are identified as the Waters of Life

and the dark, chaotic, Bitter Sea of the unconscious.

To encounter this double-natured Love Goddess thus, is both awe-inspiring and dangerous, and to bear the full, unveiled force of her energies requires both courage and skill. She may enthrall and inspire, but she may also seduce and entrance with her deathly powers. She is both hunter and hunted, and her animals, lion, tiger, panther, all the cats, share her hunting skills.

Astarte

Strange as it may seem, given the unpleasantness of the poem, 'Lesbos' is about love, and about the worldly distortions of love. Plath's title, refers to the island on which the Ancient Greek, lyrical love-poet, Sappho was born. And Plath admired Sappho, listing her first among the few poets she considered to be her own historical rivals for fame¹⁸. Sappho wrote poems to Venus, to Aprodite and to the moon; she composed a lament for Adonis; a song for a wedding; and she wrote many love poems addressed to women.

Plath's poem is addressed to a woman, but it is far from loving. And the only way this poem could be made to fit the meaning of The Star and this particular stage of the Tarot journey, is to suggest that Plath was rejecting the worldly aspects of love (the dark side of Venus/Astarte which is represented in the poem by the blood-soaked moon) in order to free her Spirit of the dark things which she saw reflected in herself. As Alaister Crowley wrote, "There are love and love. There is the dove, and there is the serpent"¹⁹. Under The Star, the initiate must tame (but not kill) the serpent in order to release the dove.

There is genuine love: And there is the Hollywood romance – theatrical, artificial and full of false drama, envy, jealousy, hate discrimination, demands, lies, loveless sex and moonshine. Like the "I" and the "You" in Plath's poem, they are "two venomous opposites", but both can exist within a single person.

Plath's speaker describes all the things associated with "Hollywood" love. Her cinematic imagery of a "windowless" place, flickering "fluorescent" light, "coy" unrealistic papery scenery, "a widow's frizz" of artificially curled hair, an "unstrung puppet" of a child who is dramatically "schizophrenic" with panic, and a narrator who is "a pathological liar", all convey falsity and pretence.

The "You" of the poem has "blown her tubes", which suggests she has used artificial means to deal with fertility problems; she has blocked the natural love of the child for her kittens; she can't stand girls, favours boys, and she maligns her husband's sexuality and blames a stereotype "Jew-mama" for this. All her love is un-natural and distorted. And, although it is unclear whether it is she or "I" who believes that the speaker should "have an affair" or sit, like a mermaid or a Siren, on a Cornish rock combing her hair, the "tiger pants", like the child's kittens in their "cement well", suggest the mistreatment of the predatory cats which belong to Venus/Astarte.

Perhaps “in another life”, or “in air”, these two aspects of love – the “Me” and the “You” – could become healthy and whole, but “Meanwhile”, in this life, “doped” by the latest soporifics, befogged by everyday chores, they remain separate and opposed. “I” calls “you” “Orphan”, as if trying to cut off this personality which is made sick by the natural world and for whom the “thrill” of “acting, acting, acting” has passed. She sees the “impotent husband” as potential protection from the “lightning” and the “acid baths” of “you”: like the transmission pole of an old trolley–bus (tram) or the opposite pole of a magnet, he might neutralize or channel her dangerous energies, so she tries to “keep him in”. But he, “flogged” (beaten, worn-out), “lumps it” (a wonderfully vivid phrase for a disgruntled, slumped, stomping exit) down and artificial, “plastic” cobbled hill. And all that the “I” sees are the “blue sparks”, like the sparks from a faulty electrical contact, which “spill” and split like shattered quartz crystal.

Quartz is a magical crystal, a symbol of integrity and virtue and attributed with special protective and psychic powers. But the crystal is shattered, Plath’s speaker exclaims “O jewel. O valuable.” but she immediately recalls a bloody moon, like a “sick /Animal”. The dark, moon–face of the Goddess has appeared and even as her moon returns to normal it remains terrifying, “Hard and apart and white”, as if the Goddess, herself, has been injured. Even her light on the sand is a “scale–sheen”, serpentine, and terrifying, and her double nature is reflected in the “mulatto” bodies which “We” (the you and the I are remembered as united in this task) had lovingly shaped from that sand, as if attempting to re–combine, with love, the “million bits” of quartz (which is what sand is) until it feels like “silky grits” in one whole but two–natured body.

This hallucinatory, dream–like vision ends with the equally dream like image of a dog carrying off the husband. Dogs, too, have a long mythological association with the Goddess. They howl at the moon, so became a symbol of the Moon Goddess but they are also associated with fertility²⁰. The dog in ‘Lesbos’ is part of the moonscape, and the husband, everywhere in the poem, is a useless, “doggy” companion - “an old pole”, “hugging his ball and chain down by the gate”. Perhaps the Moon Goddess sent a dog to retrieve him and punish him for his incompetence and weakness. But for whatever reason he is in this poem, he is not wanted by either of the women and, if this poem is about cleansing and freeing the Spirit of Love, he is part of the worldly manifestations of love from which the speaker is freeing herself.

That memory/dream, however, was then: “Now”, the speaker is “up to her neck” in “hate”. Whether this hate is hers or she has been filled with it by the ‘you’ of the poem is unclear, but the speaker is packing away all the things which promise new life – the uncooked “hard potatoes”, the “babies”, the “cats” ready to take them with her.

The doubleness continues in lines in which “acid” is linked with “love”, “love” with “hate”; “white and black”; the sea “drives in” and is spewed back; and the slumped husband and the hate–filled wife who (inexplicably) fills him daily with “soul–stuff”. The final images of “you” are of a “flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat” whose voice is so close to the speaker that she wears it like an ear–ring. “That is that”, repeated twice, has a double finality.

“You” peers from the door: “I” can’t communicate but, ultimately, Plath closes that door and the speaker watches all the artificiality, all the trappings which hide sick love and destructive hate – all that “cute décor” and “you” disappear. The images which Plath chose to describe this closing are images drawn from nature: it is like “the fist of a baby”, or, more appropriately, like a sea-anemone, which, when touched, enfolds its beautiful but deadly tentacles within a smooth, rubbery body.

The speaker, “still raw” (sensitive, sore, and possibly now stripped of all artificialities) say “I may be back”, but it is not clear who says the line which directly follows this. Is it the speaker making a statement about the familiarity of “you” with “lies” – “you know what lies are for”? Or is she pointing out that her own promise to return is a lie? Is this another suggestion that I and the you of the poem are the same person and that the whole ordeal is a deliberate cleansing of the Spirit of love in that person?

And are we to accept the final line as a declaration that the two aspects of love, the spiritual and the mundane, will never meet again? Or is the “Zen heaven” which the you of the poem espouses another of her artificialities, and meeting is possible only in a dogma-free state of mystical knowledge?

In the end, the poem confirms none of these speculations. If Plath did have a purpose for this poem other than to recreate and ‘dismember’²¹ some friends or acquaintances and to vent her feelings in her Ariel voice, we may never know.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The numbers 3 and 7 both have ancient religious, mystical and magical importance (e.g. in Christian religion, the Trinity and the seven days of the Creation).
2. Plath’s note for a BBC script. Ariel: The Restored Edition, p.196.
3. Sylvia Plath Collected Poems, Note 194, p 294.
4. Surprisingly, given the energy of the poem, Anne Stevenson in Bitter Fame (p. 272), notes that this horse was “an elderly, ponderous horse”.
5. Hughes, T. ‘The Evolution of ‘Sheep in Fog’, Winter Pollen, p.199.
6. Rákóczi, The Painted Caravan, p.54.
7. Plath records this ride vividly in ‘Whiteness I Remember’ (Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, pp.102-3). Ted Hughes’ poem ‘Sam’ also describes it (Birthday Letters, Faber, 1998, pp.10-11).
8. Hughes, Winter Pollen, p.200.

9. Crowley, A. *The Book of Thoth*, Samuel Weiser Inc. York Beach, Maine, 1985, pp.103-4. There is no evidence that Plath read Crowley's work, most of which was only available in libraries until *The Book of Thoth* and the cards described in it were published in a trade edition in 1985. However, much of Crowley's teaching was repeated in more easily available books of occult lore.
10. Hughes to Sagar, 23 May 1981, in Reid, C. (ed.), *Letters of Ted Hughes*, p.446.
11. Brain, T. 'Unstable Manuscripts', in Helle, A. (ed.), *The Unravelling Archive*, p.18.
12. Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p.196-7. In *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes adds that "the actual occasion was a visit by two well-meaning men who invited TH to live abroad at a tempting salary, and whom she therefore resented". Neither explanation rules out the possibility of another, occult, meaning to the poem.
13. 'Proverbs of Hell', *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Plowman*, M (ed.) William Blake: *Poems and Prophecies*, Dent, London, 1970, p.45.
14. William Blake. "How do you know but that ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, Is an immense world of delight, closed by our senses five?" . 'A Memorable Fancy', *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, In *Plowman*, M (ed.), William Blake: *Poems and Prophecies*, p.44.
15. Hughes, F. Interviewed in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p.6. She went on to say that she "remembered being driven around in a car full of cats and my little brother" and that she identified with the references in the poem.
16. Hughes, F. 'Foreword' to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, pp.xv-xvi.
17. Huson, P. *The Devil's Picture Book*, Abacus, 1972. p.228.
18. Plath's journal entry for 29 March 1958, in Kukil, K.(ed.), *Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p.360.
19. Crowley, A. *The Book of Thoth*, p.108.
20. Generally, dogs do the goddesses' bidding, as did the dogs which devoured Acteon after he encountered the virgin huntress, Diana, bathing. Hecate/ Diana (before Diana became known as the Virgin Huntress) was a night-huntress accompanied by a pack of demon dogs. She was also, in one of her Roman forms, a goddess of fertility.
21. Frieda Hughes wrote of "the extreme ferocity with which some of [her] mother's poems dismembered those close to her...even neighbours and acquaintances. 'Foreword', *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. pp.xvii-xviii.

Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot text and illustrations. © Ann Skea 11 February 2013.
For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at
ann@skea.com

[Go To Next Chapter](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot (6)

'The Other', 'Stopped Dead' 'Poppies in October', 'The Courage of Shutting Up' .

© Ann Skea.

Moon cardstrip

'The Other' (dated 2 July 1962), which is the next poem in Plath's Ariel sequence, is aligned with the Tarot card of The Moon (card 18).

In Ted Hughes' discussion of Plath's journals, he writes of her confronting 'The Other'. He was not at that time referring to Plath's poem but to her other self – "the deathly woman at the heart of everything"¹ – that part of herself which, through her writing, she constantly strove to come to terms with and overcome.

Hughes describes her as confronting "her own moon-faced sarcophagus...the moon in its most sinister aspect", and he writes that it was this 'other' which she closed in on as she developed her Ariel voice. By December, he wrote, "she knew quite well what she had brought off in October and November...she had overcome, by a stunning display of power the bogies of her life"².

Plath's journals, her reading of Jung, her honours thesis 'The Magic Mirror', and the imagery in many of her poems, confirm her interest in doubles, doppelgangers and mirrors. In 'Mirror' (dated 23 October 1961), a woman bends over the glass "searching...for what she really is" and in Plath's journals, there are times when she speaks of herself in the third person: "I thought about the shock treatment description last night, the deadly sleep of her madness" or, in the next paragraph, of a judgmental alter-ego, "the blonde one, pure and smug and favoured"³.

There is a great deal of doubleness in Plath's poem, 'The Other'. It is written in couplets and divided into two sections by a space between stanzas eight and nine. As in 'Lesbos', it is addressed to "you" by "I". Yet, there is often confusion as to which is the grammatical subject of Plath's sentences. And, towards the end of the poem, the lines "cold glass, how you insert yourself / Between myself and myself", suggest that the speaker is confronting her own image in a mirror.

The you and the I of the poem are connected in other ways, too: "your head on my wall", is linked in a single couplet with the "Navel cords" which, in the continued sentence, "Shriek from my belly". This suggests that they are connected by birth and that the two subjects (indicated by the punctuation of these line) are aspects of the same being.

The “moon-glow”, the “sick one”, and all the grievous faults which follow in the next six lines (21-26), are attributed to neither “you” nor “I”, so, may apply to both; and these lines also link the “I” who rides the navel cords (line 18) with the mirror image of “myself and myself” (line 27).

Nor is the one who scratches identified in the lines which follow it as separate from the one who bleeds. Instead, the “cat”, is placed in a single couplet in such a way that its scratch and the subsequent blood-flow may be “Between myself and myself”.

None of this explains the first part of the poem, but the identification of “you” with “White Nike” whose “blue lightning” streams between the walls; the “moon-glow” and the “sick one”; the nightmarish imagery of “meathooks”, “corpuscles” and “blood”; the bad and “sulphurous” smells; the barrenness and the adulteries; the knitting which hooks “itself to itself”; the severed head and the “I” riding like a witch on the shrieking navel cords; all these have strong connections with lunar madness and with the dark face of the Moon Goddess.

All this, too, has strong connections with the Tarot card of The Moon, which depicts a moon which, ambiguously, may be seen as waxing or waning, full and dark. Dew-like drops fall to earth around it and two dogs (wolves or jackals) raise their muzzles to howl at it. Two towers (sometimes one black and one white) stand on the horizon and in a large pool in the foreground a clawed creature (crayfish, lobster or crab) raises its two fierce claws towards it.

Everything associated with the moon is symbolized on this card and in Plath’s poem. Its changing aspects; its influence on the waters of the earth: its connection with blood and with the monthly cycles associate with menstruation, fertility and birth; its connection with imagination, love and lunacy; and the black-and-white moonscapes in which dogs howl, dreams and nightmares flourish, and where witches ride their broomsticks and ‘draw down the moon’ into water, glass and magic mirrors in order to weave their spells.

Rákóczi writes that at this stage the initiate is “thrown into a trance” in which “the pageantry of rite and sacrifice are projected into his mind”. Through this process, the power of hallucination is demonstrated and the initiate is made “free from illusion and disillusion”. He mentions the association of Isis with the moon and interprets the falling dewdrops as her “pearls of wisdom”. The towers, he describes as “structures of the mind, as the beasts are of the body”; and the moon is “the initiation which is beyond either”⁴.

However, if Plath was writing ‘The Other’ with the Tarot card of The Moon in mind, then she did not follow Rákóczi’s guidance but chose a different mythological figure for her poem, and one which was far more appropriate for her purpose.

Plath names her Moon Goddess, Nike, just as she did in the earlier Ariel poem ‘Barren Woman’. Nike, in Greek mythology was ‘Victory’, and her name is sharp and abrupt and appropriate to the rhythms and tone of ‘The Other’. But Nike’s earlier, Egyptian, form is

that of the Moon Goddess, Nephthys (which means 'Lady of the House'⁵) and it is she whom Plath describes in this poem. A "doorstep", and the "walls" between which this Goddess's energies stream, flashing blue lightning, may represent her house; and her handbag and knitting her domesticity, but as Lady of the Body, she may also be the other self of the speaker, just as Nephthys is the secret, shadow twin of Isis.

Egyptologist Wallis Budge writes that whereas Isis represents the bright face of the moon, Nephthys is "the personification of darkness and all that belongs to it" including "death, decay, diminution and immobility"⁶. But both Isis and Nephthys were "necessary to the coming into existence of life" and together these twins reassemble (knit together) and prepare the body of their brother, Osiris, for resurrection⁷. Together, they prepare the funeral bed for Osiris, and Nephthys "kneels at the head of the bier and helps him to arise"⁸. Like her sister, Isis, Nephthys is "a mighty one of words of power", and it is the words of both these goddesses, chanted over the bier, which help the deceased to be reborn. Nephthys and Isis In the papyri which depict the Egyptian Hall of Judgment, the two share a place of importance immediately behind the seated Osiris, and Nephthys stands, like a shadow, alongside but partly hidden by, her twin.

Budge quotes the Greek historian Plutarch (c. 46–120 AD), who described Nephthys as "at first barren" (just as Plath's 'Other' has "a womb of marble"), but as later having given birth to the Jackal-headed god Anubis, God of the Dead. And he wrote that the sistrum (the musical instrument which is the symbol of both Nephthys and Isis) was carved with "the effigies of a cat with a human visage" and had, on its lower edge, engravings of "on the one side the face of Isis, and on the other that of Nephthys". He also wrote that "the Cat denotes the moon".

The words of Isis and Nephthys were "Lamentations", followed by "Festive Songs". Plath's words created a poem describing secrets, corruption and dismemberment, but in it the cut and the blood (which, in Rákóczi's commentary on the card, presage the ultimate achievement of mystic knowledge and wisdom) are delivered by a "scratch" like that from one of the Goddesses' cats. And the blood which is drawn, as in the cutting of a Gypsy initiate and in the dismemberment of Osiris, is "dark fruit", "a cosmetic": a wound which is necessary but "No, It is not fatal".

Plath, writing in her journal when she was mourning the loss of Richard Sassoon, identified herself with Isis: "Then I was in my black coat and beret: Isis bereaved, Isis in search, walking a dark barren street"⁹. So, to identify her shadow-self as Nike/Nephthys – 'the other' – was most appropriate.

The above interpretation of the poem, however, does not explain all Plath's imagery. Who is the man whose "parts" are assumed by Nike? Are we to read 'assumes' as 'takes up', as Nephthys took up the dismembered parts of Osiris and helped Isis to piece them together? If so, "a meathook" would be a cruel and unlikely tool for her to use, although perhaps appropriate to her dark, deathly powers. What are we to make of the "bright hair, shoe-black, old plastic", which is part of a confession to the police, except that it indicates secrets? And what of the "stolen horses" linked so closely to

“fornications”? Is that just a reference to the sexual energies often associated with horses and the stolen gratifications which characterize fornication and which are part of the Moon Goddess’s “abominations” which Plath described in ‘Thalidomide’?

The Egyptian’s use of the image of Nephthys on the canopic jars which held the lungs of the mummified deceased, might explain Plath’s image of Nike/Nephthys “sucking breath”, but nothing else about the couplet in which this occurs supports this.

In spite of the strong Ariel ‘voice’ of the speaker, and in spite of Plath’s careful construction of the poem, without some kind of help from the poet (Plath offered no comments on this poem) there are too many puzzles in the imagery for ‘The Other’ to be considered a good poem. This may have been the reason why Ted Hughes chose not to include it in his publication of Ariel.

The sisters Isis and Nephthys, however, and their intimate connection with wholeness and rebirth, are clearly appropriate to Plath’s own regenerative journey. And, having faced this shadowy aspect of her Spirit and acknowledged that it is an essential part of her Self, the next stage of the journey is to expose her Spirit to the all-powerful rays of the sun, which is the source of all life and growth in our world.

Yet, there is no obvious connection between ‘The Other’ and the next poem in her Ariel sequence, ‘Stopped Dead’ (dated 10 October 1962), which would be linked with The Sun (card 19) in the Tarot journey. And, according to the dates on Plath’s manuscripts, some three months and six other Ariel poems separate these two poems from each other. Nor does ‘Stopped Dead’ seem to be a sun-filled poem. Rather, Frieda Hughes has identified it as one of Plath’s “more lacerating poems”, which her father left out of his publication of Ariel because it was about his maternal uncle, Walter Farrar¹⁰. This uncle was a prosperous mill owner who, with two of his brothers, produced “cords, moleskins, khakis”¹¹, all fabrics suitable for making trousers (or “pants”, as Plath has it in her poem).

That Plath knew this uncle, who was very close to her husband¹², is clear from notes she wrote in 1956 for her story ‘All the Dead Dears’¹³. And he seems to be the obvious target of the speaker’s ire in ‘Stopped Dead’, where her sarcasm is directed at “Uncle, pants factory, Fatso, millionaire” – the capitalising of ‘Fatso’ and her description of him sunk, “still as a ham” in his “seven chins”, being particularly nasty. Yet, many of the other images in the poem do not make sense of this attribution.

At one moment, with a “squeal of brakes”, the speaker seems to describe a car accident, and yet the uncle is slumped in “a chair”, rather than a car seat. And how does one explain a “dead drop” so high that the viewer seems to have a view like that from an aircraft and what should be scenery, or possibly a country, looks more like a seething cauldron of molten metals? What can we make of the speaker’s urge to call the screaming of “a goddam baby” “a sunset”? Or of her comment that there is always “a bloody baby in the air”? Why in the air? And why should she think that this uncle might suspect her of wanting to murder him, like “Sad Hamlet, with a knife”, when all she

wants, it seems, is to carry off his soul?

Sun cardstrip

Does it help to look at some of the meanings and symbolism of The Sun card in the Tarot?

One meaning attributed to the card is that it represents a spiritual awakening, a sudden insight: a moment “rooted in immobility” in which “the newly awakened child” of the Spirit is offered, for a brief time, a sudden, brilliant vision of the world as a new and unfamiliar landscape¹⁴. Perhaps this is the dead stop of the poem’s title: but the vision revealed seems far from mystical.

The card in traditional Tarot decks depicts two small, almost naked children, twins, who embrace each other and dance together in a walled garden under the full red and gold face of the sun. Drops of dew – life-giving moisture created by the sun – fall around them; and behind them the carefully built wall suggests that they are within a Paradisal garden (like the hidden, laughing children in T.S.Eliot’s Four Quartets) and/or that they have stepped outside normal human boundaries and are now able to withstand the full, destructive, and creative power of the sun.

Rákóczi interprets this picture as showing “the Sun of Adepthood” shining on the new-born Adept, who “has the heart of a child” but is now “unified in his earthly persona and his higher individuality”¹⁵. In other words, the initiate has cleansed and re-united Body, Soul and Spirit and is now reborn as an Adept to whom the Mysteries will soon be revealed.

‘Stopped Dead’ contains a number of images which can be related to the sun but they come from a mixture of alchemical and mythological sources, few of which are depicted on the Tarot card.

uroborus

The car’s wheels – “two rubber grubs” which “bite their sweet tails” – perfectly describes the Uroborus, the snake biting its tail, which is an ancient alchemical and mystical symbol of Nature and its eternal cycle of life and death: and the sun is the source of everything in Nature.

The “Red and yellow, two passionate hot metals/ Writhing and sighing”, also perfectly describes an alchemical cauldron at the final stage of the purification process by which gross matter (sometimes called lead) is turned into gold. Red represents heat: yellow, light. Combined, they represent the sun, which is the alchemical symbol for gold. The “writhing and sighing” of these metals in Plath’s poem also conveys the double meanings of alchemical symbols, where the alchemical cauldron represents the human body in which the gross matter of the soul is purified in order to release Spiritual gold.

Having just dealt with the ‘twins’ Isis and Nephthys in ‘The Other’, the naked, reborn, twin children on the Tarot card of The Sun are appropriate to this stage of the journey,

but Isis and Nephthys, in Egyptian genealogy (which is often muddled) are not only wife and sisters of Osiris but also nieces of the Sun God, Ra¹⁶. So these twins could call the Sun God, 'uncle'; and the full, round sun, source of all, symbol of gold, could be seen as a 'fatso, millionaire'.

In another mythology the Sun God, Phaeton, rode in a chariot (sometimes called a 'car').

And in yet another mythology, Mithras, the Sun God of a mystical sect specifically associated with Rome, would often, in his manifestation as our earthly sun, sink (perhaps red as a ham) in the seven hills of Rome.

Looking even further, Ra was commonly depicted as an eagle (as is the sun god in many mythologies) and his sons and grandsons were represented by the smaller bird of that family, the hawk. The speaker's view of the landscape in 'Stopped Dead' is akin to the perspective of the bird in Ted Hughes' early poem 'The Hawk in the Rain'¹⁷. And in lines which were included in a recording of Plath reading her Ariel poems but were omitted from all the published versions of 'Stopped Dead', there is a suggestion of a roosting place suitable for a hawk but not an eagle:

You see I see a sort of twig
That might just hold me
But not you,
You're too big.¹⁸

The dead stop, the height, the unidentified landscape, the bloody baby linked with a sunset, the brief "visit", all these things fit the Tarot card's meanings; and some of Plath's images seem to be drawn from alchemical and/or various mythological representations of the sun. However, once again, I feel that the above suggestions are unsatisfactory, and that they come from too many different sources to be convincing. Nor do they resolve all the puzzles. Why, for instance, should the speaker be suspected of wanting to kill this uncle and steal his soul, especially if he represents the sun which is the source of all life and which in Tarot presages the imminent achievement of the journeyer's final goal?

Even if these puzzles were to be resolved, and if Plath was indeed making the Tarot journey and living it through the creation of her Ariel poems, then this poem is still too fixed in Plath's own personal and emotional world to be a product of actual enlightenment. It may have been an attempt to imagine such an 'awakening' and what it would be like to see the world anew in the all-revealing rays of the sun. However, in seeming to describe an actual living person, and in doing so in such an unpleasant way, the poem demonstrates that Plath was still struggling to extricate herself from what her daughter called the "otherworldly, menacing landscape" in which her ferocious Ariel voice flourished¹⁹.

Unlike 'Stopped Dead', Plath's next Ariel poem, 'Poppies in October', (dated 27 October 1962) is a superb interpretation of the mystical meaning of its matching Tarot card,

Judgment (card 20).

Judgment cardstrip

Judgment is the card of revelation. Its occult, mystical meaning is of a sudden, overwhelming, direct communication from the Divine Creative Source. This, for the newly awakened Adept, represents a direct call to the Spirit (the Divine spark within them) to confront all that he or she has been and done in the world, and to use their new insight – their new knowledge of their own identity and powers – in their future interaction with others.

The Judgment card of most Tarot decks alludes to the Biblical Last Judgment: the ‘call’ is mediated by a great, winged angel who blows a golden trumpet, and three figures – mother, father and child – are seen emerging from an earthly grave.

In Plath's poem, it is the poppies, their “skirts” brighter than the October morning “sun–clouds”, which trigger the speaker's moment of revelation – a moment in which, as one Tarot text puts it, “the heart of the visionary expands” and the “perfect, jewel-like sublimity” of the infinite is revealed²⁰.

The title is like an exclamation of surprise at the sight of these flowers which usually bloom in mid–summer but which are flourishing in Autumnal October. And the brevity of the poem, the short, simple lines, the minimal punctuation, the sudden “astounding” blooming of the heart and the exclamation “Oh my God”, all convey the breathless wonder of the speaker.

In a world of sickness and pollution, where eyes are “dulled”, the poppies “cry open”: each bloom, like a rounded, red mouth crying out also resembles the trumpet of a Divine messenger which cries “open” to the tombs and brings clear vision to the Adept.

And, like the sick woman in the ambulance “whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly”, the speaker's heart bursts with joy and wonder at this “love-gift” which has been brought to her so unexpectedly by the ephemeral, unearthly beauty of the poppies.

The speaker herself recognizes this transcendental moment and speaks directly to her God. And her question has two meanings depending on which word is emphasised: “who am I?” or “who am I?”: thus questioning her own nature and identity and/or questioning the reason why she, in particular, has been singled out to receive this revelation – this “gift”.

Plath's careful construction of this poem reflects not only the occult meaning of the card, but also all its other symbolism. She includes God and mankind; sky and earth; the mundane and the ephemeral; life and death. Her sick woman, bowler–hatted men and the ‘I’ who is the newly awakened speaker reflect the three figures on the card, which represent the complete life–cycle in Nature – mother, father and child.

Unlike male poets and the male writers of Biblical texts, who choose the rose as a symbol of sacred and spiritual love, purity, and mystical redemption, Plath chose the poppy – the Goddesses' flower, in which narcosis, enchantment, death and resurrection are all symbolised.

And, in the structure of her poem, her four tercets combine the four–square, earth–bound energies with the magical Goddess–linked power of three.

In Mystical lore it is love which brings revelation, redemption and renewal. Here, in Plath's poem, it is a "gift, a love–gift", which brings all the alchemical elements of the world together – sky, earth, air and water – so that renewal can take place. And it is this love–gift, and the wonder it engenders, which, in the final lines of the poem, calls the speaker from the "forest of frost" into the cornflower blue "dawn" of an October morning and presages a new beginning.

Real as the gift of flowers in 'Poppies in October' may seem, and real as this moment of revelation is made to feel, the gift might also be seen as Plath's own creative gift which blossomed so extraordinarily in this poem and in her 'Ariel' poem, both of which she dated as having been written on her thirtieth birthday, 27 October, 1962.

World cardstrip

'The Courage of Shutting Up' (dated 2 October 1962) is the twenty–second poem in Plath's arrangement of her Ariel manuscripts. As such, it is the last poem of the Tarot journey and it is linked with the card of The World (card 21).

Perhaps because it was written before either 'Ariel' or 'Poppies in October', it shares none of the exhilaration and power of these poems. Nor does it express the peace, balance, and harmony which mark the completion of the journey and are an essential part of the meaning of The World card.

In most Tarot decks, The World depicts a beautiful, dancing woman, naked but for a loose veil which floats around her. She rests one foot on the earth and raises the other behind her in the air. In her hands she holds two wands, or batons, and around her is a wreath of laurel or flowers. In the four corners of the card, are the four symbols of the Biblical evangelists - eagle, lion, bull and angel. The nakedness of the dancing figure reflects the innocence of a new beginning, but this is no longer the innocence of The Fool: it is an innocence and open–ness born of self–knowledge, judgment and wisdom, and it expresses psychic wholeness – the re–integration of Body, Soul and Spirit.

The figure on the card dances in air but has not lost touch with the earth. She dances (to borrow a phrase from T.S.Eliot) at "the still point of the turning world"²¹. And the wreath around her is a symbol of victory, successful achievement and, also, it suggests the Cosmic Egg in which all chaos is brought to order.

The Adept now, in Rákóczi's words, is "Lord of all worlds above and below"²². The batons which the figure holds symbolize her magical power to re–unite all opposites,

heaven and earth, active and passive. Her Spirit, now, joins with the four Alchemical world elements (air, fire, earth and water) which are represented in the corners of the card and which, as symbols of the Biblical evangelists, also represent the earthly power of mystical knowledge and teaching.

In Plath's poem, however, she seems still to "walk in a ring / A groove of old faults, deep and bitter", as she did in 'Event'²³: "Shutting up" or "quietness"²⁴, is not the result of peace and harmony but an act of "courage", and the speaker does not express any confidence that this is possible, nor does she resolve to do this. Instead, she rehearses the difficulties, dwelling on inner turmoil, the disturbed circling of the brain, the memories which revolve like gramophone records and which, in her imagination, segue into images of a surgeon, then a tattoo artist creating blue pictures which, "over and over", express the same "grievances".

The struggle to stay silent is expressed as a war. There is "artillery"; and "cannons", torture and death. The repetition and rhythm of "bastardies / Bastardies, usages, desertions and doubleness" and of "a tattooist / Tattooing over and over", emphasize the recurrence of old "grievances", echo the tramp of marching feet and reinforce the military images of warfare and death.

The tongue, too, is linked with warfare, blood and punishment. It is an "antique billhook" and, like the naval 'cat' used for flogging, it has "nine tails". But it does not flog, it "flays", which is a far more bloody and vicious. And the paronomasia of 'tails' and 'tales' suggests its capacity for story-telling, deception and lying.

Even the eyes are connected with warfare, torture, deception, "death-rays" and killing. "The eyes, the eyes, the eyes" are everywhere and, as mirrors of the Soul, they may also reflect the "terrible" tortured and deathly inner state of a man.

"Do not worry about the eyes", the speaker tells us, yet their deadly "rays" (as if looks could kill) still belong to a country (a person) who is "obstinately independent" and who, although "insolvent", still exists. "Insolvent", too, has the double meaning of 'impoverished' and also, as 'in solvent', of being immersed in a solvent, i.e. something which may eventually dissolve it. Neither of these meanings, however, suggests that the 'country' has vanished. In spite of the "folded...flags" of the eyes, the closed mouth and the guarded tongue, the careful surgeon/tattooist – the person to whom these physical attributes belong – is still present and the dangers posed by the mind and the body still exist.

Rákóczi's commentary on The World offers no help in deciphering this poem, nor do many other Tarot texts, most of which concentrate on the successful completion of the journey. In Alister Crowley's words, for example, the card is "a glyph of the completion of the Great Work in its highest sense"; and just as "The Fool represents the negative issuing into manifestation" (i.e. birth and new beginnings at the start of the journey), so The World "is that manifestation, its purpose accomplished, ready to return"²⁵.

Crowley's comment, however, does express something more than just completion. For the ordinary human being, the tarot journey is never-ending. As Ted Hughes put it at the end of his Alchemical journey of Cave Birds:²⁶

"At the end of the ritual

up comes a goblin"

The Fool who began the journey may be wiser and more self-aware by the stage at which The World is reached but she or he still carries the 'baggage' of a former life, and the future, with new joys and woes, must still be negotiated.

If Plath's poem does represent The World of the Tarot, then she acknowledges this continuity. Her black disks resemble old gramophone records; her cannon and billhooks come from an earlier military age; her "engravings of Rangoon" and the stuffed animal heads "hung up" in the "library" suggests souvenirs of a past Colonial posting; and the folded flags belong to "a country no longer heard of". All this suggest a past life. The task, now, is to live with that and to go forward into a future which will be shaped by lessons learned on this newly completed Tarot journey.

In the words of one of the few Tarot texts that do encompass this meaning, The World "represents the synthesis of the long-sought spiritual experience with the processes of daily life"; and for the successful journeyer "a time comes to return to the World, where the experiences of spiritual encounter may be tested and manifested in the context of other living beings"²⁷.

In the light of my examination of the first twenty-two Ariel poems, I have to conclude that Plath did use the Tarot to order her Ariel manuscripts and that at least some of the poems were written with a particular Tarot card in mind. But given that the chronological order in which the poems were written is markedly different to the order in which the cards are arranged in a traditional Tarot journey, her method of using the cards is still a puzzle.

It is tempting to suggest that Plath followed the pattern of the Tarot journey in the traditional way, then dated her manuscripts some time after she wrote the poems in order to disguise what she was doing and to abide by the strictures on revealing occult secrets. Plath's copy of *The Painted Caravan* was well used and she would certainly have read Rákóczi's opening remarks, in which he spells out the "outer and inner pledge of secrecy" imposed on any Gypsy who uses the Tarot, and the penalties for violating this pledge, which include the psychological penalty of "a terrible disruption of mental powers"²⁸. Plath would certainly have wanted to avoid that.

Ted Hughes, as well as noting that Plath's Ariel manuscripts were "carefully ordered"²⁹, wrote that from the first Ariel poem Plath "suddenly started saving all the draft pages, which she had never bothered about before. She not only saved them, she dated them carefully". At the same time, he commented "I don't know how grossly she might have exaggerated, but there certainly were days when she wrote three poems, or rather finished three"³⁰.

Plath's journals confirm her propensity for exaggerating, but the evidence of the Smith College Ariel archive³¹ does not support a supposition that she had any ulterior motive in keeping and dating all her drafts, or that she deliberately misdated all those poems.

In the Smith College Archive, unlike the poems written before 'Little Fugue' (dated 2 April 1962) and those written after 'Mary's Song' (dated 19 Nov. 1962), each group of drafts for each poem written between 2 April 1962 and 2 December 1963 (except for 'The Other') contains holographs (hand-written) and/or typescripts written on pink Smith College Memorandum paper.

In addition to this, the majority of these holographs and typescripts have draft pages of The Bell Jar, Version 2. on the verso, and many of these pages from The Bell Jar are in reversed but consecutive order following the chronology of the dates on the Ariel poems.

For example:

'The Courage of Shutting up'
'The Bee Meeting'
'The Arrival of the Bee Box'

'Stings'
'The Swarm'
'Wintering'

2 Oct. 1962
3 Oct. 1962
4 Oct. 1962

6 Oct. 1962
7 Oct. 1962
9 Oct. 1962
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2

Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Ch.6
Ch.6
Ch.6
Ch.5
Ch.5
Ch.4

Ch.4. pp.3,4

pp.2,6,7,10,11,12

pp.9,8

pp.11

pp.1,2,5,6,7,8

pp.7,8,9,10,11,12,13

pp.5,6,8,9

One consecutively dated group of poems – ‘A Secret’, ‘The Applicant’, ‘Daddy’, ‘Medusa’, ‘The Jailor’ and ‘Lesbos’ (dated 1962 October 11,12,16,17,18 respectively) – stands out as being different, because it has drafts of Ted Hughes’ unpublished play, *The Calm*, on each verso. And there are several other anomalies in this seemingly regular pattern shown by the Smith College Ariel Archive drafts, although whether these are significant is debatable.

There are no holographs in the Smith archive for ‘Magi’, ‘Morning Song’, ‘Barren Woman’ or ‘Tulips’, all of which were written before January 1962, and all of which were included amongst the first twenty-two Ariel poems³².

‘The Other’ exists as undated holograph pages numbered by Plath 1 – 5, the verso of which are typescript pages of poems “probably from *The Colossus*”. The date ascribed to ‘The Other’ first appears on a typescript which has been numbered by Plath as page 6 and which also has part of a *Colossus* poem on the verso. Unlike all the other 1962 poems, none of the Smith College manuscripts for this poem are on pink Smith College Memorandum paper. This is also one of the very few poems not written on recycled drafts of *The Bell Jar*.

The first undated holograph pages of ‘Death & Co.’ (1 un-numbered and one numbered ‘2’ by Plath) and one undated typescript page (numbered 3); plus the first dated typescript page (dated 12 November 1962, and numbered 4), are all on pink Smith College Memorandum paper and have nothing on the verso.

However, four further undated, un-numbered typescript pages of ‘Death & Co.’ have the poems ‘Totem’, ‘The Munich Mannequins’, ‘Child’ and ‘Paralytic’ on the verso, all of which were written in 1963. ‘Gigolo’ (also written in 1963), occurs on the verso of yet another ‘Death & Co.’ typescript but this time the poem is marked “revised 1962 Nov 12”.

Since notes for ‘Death & Co.’, typed by Plath and dated 13 Dec. 1962, are included amongst others written for Douglas Cleverdon for a BBC programme of new poems, it seems that the 1963 poems were written later, on recycled draft sheets of ‘Death & Co.’. Yet, this suggests that there may well have been more drafts than are currently held in the archive.

One other poem raises a similar possibility. ‘Thalidomide’ exists in the Smith College Archive as four, undated, holograph pages on pink Smith College Memorandum paper with nothing on the verso of any of these pages. Two typescripts, similarly on pink paper

with nothing on the verso are dated 1962 Nov.4. But one further typescript, revised but undated, has the 1963 poem 'Balloons' on the verso.

In the end, the way in which Plath approached the Tarot when writing her Ariel poems and arranging her Ariel manuscripts is impossible to determine. My guess is that she was inspired by *The Painted Caravan* and began to use the Tarot cards in a random way to prompt her imagination. Then, at some stage, she recognized that her own long quest to find healing through her writing was paralleled in the Tarot journey and that this could be one more aid (a powerful magical aid, too) to achieving her goal: so, she decided to order her poems to conform with it. Many of her poems, like 'Morning Song' and 'Tulips', already suited particular stages in the Tarot journey but some poems she revised and rewrote; and some she wrote specifically for a particular stage and card, and later inserted them among her manuscripts.

Words, as Plath wrote are like axes. The echoes of their strokes can travel "off from the centre like horses"³³. And there are so many echoes in Plath's poetry – echoes of her life, the people she knew, her loves and her hates; echoes of mythology, folk-tales and magic – that her poems can mean many different things to many different people. Perhaps she did use the Tarot in Ariel, perhaps not. Whatever one believes about that, Plath's Ariel poems are remarkable poems written, as Ted Hughes said, "with the full power and music of her extraordinary nature". Ariel, as he also said, "is not easy poetry to criticize. It is not much like any other poetry". But "It is her... It is just like her – but permanent"³⁴.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', *Winter Pollen*, p.187.
2. *Winter Pollen*, p.188.
3. Kukil, K. (ed.) *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 26 February 1956, p.212.
4. Rákóczi, B. *The Painted Caravan*, pp.63-4.
5. Egyptologist Wallis Budge writes that the 'House' was interpreted as being the night sky but may be a temple or abode. This Goddess is also known as Nebt-Heb (Lady of the body). Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol.2, Dover Publications, N.Y. 1969, pp.254-60.
6. Budge, W. *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol 2. p.258.
7. Isis is better known as Osiris's wife but she was both his wife and his sister. Nephthys was sister to Isis and Osiris, and sister and wife of Seth.
8. Budge, W. *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol 2, p.255.

9. Kukil, K. (ed.), *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 10 March 1956, p.234.
10. Hughes, F. Foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p.xvi.
11. Ted Hughes describes these brothers' mill-products in his poem 'Sacrifice', Keegan, P.(ed.) *Ted Hughes Collected Poems*, Faber, 2003, pp.758-60.
12. In a letter to János Csokits, Ted Hughes described Walter Farrar as "My uncle – the patriarch of my family and one of my dearest friends". Reid, C.(ed.) *Letters of Ted Hughes*, May 1976, p.376.
13. Plath's journal notes for 'All the Dead Dears', which was later published in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (Faber, 1979, p.177-84.), include "central tragic figure – Uncle W". Kukil, K.(ed.) *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 31[a] 1956, p.580.
14. Irwin, L. *Gnostic Tarot*, Samuel Weiser Inc, 1998, p.320.
15. Rákóczi, B. *The Painted Caravan*, p.64.
16. Isis, Nephthys and Osiris were all born of Light (Shu) and Air (Tefnut), Earth (Geb) and Sky(Nut), all of which were created by and from the Sun-God, Ra. Osiris, however, came to be regarded, and worshipped, as the dark brother of Ra. He was in charge of the Underworld, as Ra was in charge of the Upper world. As Osiris's brother, Ra became uncle to Isis and Nephthys.
17. Ted Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p.19.
18. Quoted by John Hopkins, Tuesday March 23, in the on-line Sylvia Plath Forum, March 1999. The reading can be heard on YouTube in 'Sylvia Plath reads from *Ariel* (2)'.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3333333333>
19. Hughes, F. Foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p.xii.
20. Irwin, L. *Gnostic Tarot*, pp.326-7.
21. Eliot, T.S. *Four Quartets*, Faber, 1972, p.15.
22. Rákóczi, B. *The Painted Caravan*, p.67.
23. Sylvia Plath: *Collected Poems*, Faber, 1981, p.195.
24. An alternative title for this poem before publication was 'The Courage of Quietness'.
25. Crowley, A. *The Book of Thoth*, Weiser, Maine, 1985, p.118.
26. Ted Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p.440.

27. Irwin, L. Gnostic Tarot, p.330.

28. Rákóczi, B. The Painted Caravan, p.8. Such vows of secrecy are common in Western mystical tradition; and the maxim often adopted by the Magus (the Master) is "To Know, to Will, to Dare, and to be Silent". This maxim was first recorded in Transcendental Magic by Eliphas Levi (1810-1975), whose extensive study of mysticism and magic was certainly known to Ted Hughes.

29. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath and Her Journals', Winter Pollen, p.189.

30. Hughes, T. 'Publishing Sylvia Plath', Winter Pollen, p.167.

31. I am grateful to Karen Kukil, Associate Curator of Special Collections, William Allan Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA, for providing me with a draft of her finding aid for the Sylvia Plath Collection. My information about the Ariel holographs and typescripts is drawn from this draft.

32. 'Magi' and 'Morning Song' (though not a complete run of manuscripts/typescripts) are held by the Lilly Library, as is 'Barren Woman' under an earlier title, 'Small Hours'. 'Tulips' is held by Harvard. Plath sent the worksheets for 'Tulips' to Jack Sweeney on 22 August 1961; and the other three poems were part of the 'scrap paper' Plath sold to Indiana University through a London bookseller in November 1961. (Thanks to Peter Steinberg for this information).

33. 'Words', Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, p.270.

34. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath: Ariel', Winter Pollen, p.162.

Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot text and illustrations. © Ann Skea 12 January 2013. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot (6)

'The Other', 'Stopped Dead' 'Poppies in October', 'The Courage of Shutting Up' .

© Ann Skea.

Moon cardstrip

'The Other' (dated 2 July 1962), which is the next poem in Plath's Ariel sequence, is aligned with the Tarot card of The Moon (card 18).

In Ted Hughes' discussion of Plath's journals, he writes of her confronting 'The Other'. He was not at that time referring to Plath's poem but to her other self – "the deathly woman at the heart of everything"¹ – that part of herself which, through her writing, she constantly strove to come to terms with and overcome.

Hughes describes her as confronting “her own moon–faced sarcophagus...the moon in its most sinister aspect”, and he writes that it was this ‘other’ which she closed in on as she developed her Ariel voice. By December, he wrote, “she knew quite well what she had brought off in October and November...she had overcome, by a stunning display of power the bogies of her life”².

Plath’s journals, her reading of Jung, her honours thesis ‘The Magic Mirror’, and the imagery in many of her poems, confirm her interest in doubles, doppelgangers and mirrors. In ‘Mirror’ (dated 23 October 1961), a woman bends over the glass “searching...for what she really is” and in Plath’s journals, there are times when she speaks of herself in the third person: “I thought about the shock treatment description last night, the deadly sleep of her madness” or, in the next paragraph, of a judgmental alter–ego, “the blonde one, pure and smug and favoured”³.

There is a great deal of doubleness in Plath’s poem, ‘The Other’. It is written in couplets and divided into two sections by a space between stanzas eight and nine. As in ‘Lesbos’, it is addressed to “you” by “I”. Yet, there is often confusion as to which is the grammatical subject of Plath’s sentences. And, towards the end of the poem, the lines “cold glass, how you insert yourself / Between myself and myself”, suggest that the speaker is confronting her own image in a mirror.

The you and the I of the poem are connected in other ways, too: “your head on my wall”, is linked in a single couplet with the “Navel cords” which, in the continued sentence, “Shriek from my belly”. This suggests that they are connected by birth and that the two subjects (indicated by the punctuation of these line) are aspects of the same being.

The “moon–glow”, the “sick one”, and all the grievous faults which follow in the next six lines (21-26), are attributed to neither “you” nor “I”, so, may apply to both; and these lines also link the “I” who rides the navel cords (line 18) with the mirror image of “myself and myself” (line 27).

Nor is the one who scratches identified in the lines which follow it as separate from the one who bleeds. Instead, the “cat”, is placed in a single couplet in such a way that its scratch and the subsequent blood-flow may be “Between myself and myself”.

None of this explains the first part of the poem, but the identification of “you” with “White Nike” whose “blue lightning” streams between the walls; the “moon–glow” and the “sick one”; the nightmarish imagery of “meathooks”, “corpuscles” and “blood”; the bad and “sulphurous” smells; the barrenness and the adulteries; the knitting which hooks “itself to itself”; the severed head and the “I” riding like a witch on the shrieking navel cords; all these have strong connections with lunar madness and with the dark face of the Moon Goddess.

All this, too, has strong connections with the Tarot card of The Moon, which depicts a moon which, ambiguously, may be seen as waxing or waning, full and dark. Dew–like

drops fall to earth around it and two dogs (wolves or jackals) raise their muzzles to howl at it. Two towers (sometimes one black and one white) stand on the horizon and in a large pool in the foreground a clawed creature (crayfish, lobster or crab) raises its two fierce claws towards it.

Everything associated with the moon is symbolized on this card and in Plath's poem. Its changing aspects; its influence on the waters of the earth: its connection with blood and with the monthly cycles associate with menstruation, fertility and birth; its connection with imagination, love and lunacy; and the black-and-white moonscapes in which dogs howl, dreams and nightmares flourish, and where witches ride their broomsticks and 'draw down the moon' into water, glass and magic mirrors in order to weave their spells.

Rákóczi writes that at this stage the initiate is "thrown into a trance" in which "the pageantry of rite and sacrifice are projected into his mind". Through this process, the power of hallucination is demonstrated and the initiate is made "free from illusion and disillusion". He mentions the association of Isis with the moon and interprets the falling dewdrops as her "pearls of wisdom". The towers, he describes as "structures of the mind, as the beasts are of the body"; and the moon is "the initiation which is beyond either"⁴.

However, if Plath was writing 'The Other' with the Tarot card of The Moon in mind, then she did not follow Rákóczi's guidance but chose a different mythological figure for her poem, and one which was far more appropriate for her purpose.

Plath names her Moon Goddess, Nike, just as she did in the earlier Ariel poem 'Barren Woman'. Nike, in Greek mythology was 'Victory', and her name is sharp and abrupt and appropriate to the rhythms and tone of 'The Other'. But Nike's earlier, Egyptian, form is that of the Moon Goddess, Nephthys (which means 'Lady of the House'⁵) and it is she whom Plath describes in this poem. A "doorstep", and the "walls" between which this Goddess's energies stream, flashing blue lightning, may represent her house; and her handbag and knitting her domesticity, but as Lady of the Body, she may also be the other self of the speaker, just as Nephthys is the secret, shadow twin of Isis.

Egyptologist Wallis Budge writes that whereas Isis represents the bright face of the moon, Nephthys is "the personification of darkness and all that belongs to it" including "death, decay, diminution and immobility"⁶. But both Isis and Nephthys were "necessary to the coming into existence of life" and together these twins reassemble (knit together) and prepare the body of their brother, Osiris, for resurrection⁷. Together, they prepare the funeral bed for Osiris, and Nephthys "kneels at the head of the bier and helps him to arise"⁸. Like her sister, Isis, Nephthys is "a mighty one of words of power", and it is the words of both these goddesses, chanted over the bier, which help the deceased to be reborn. Nephthys and IsisIn the papyri which depict the Egyptian Hall of Judgment, the two share a place of importance immediately behind the seated Osiris, and Nephthys stands, like a shadow, alongside but partly hidden by, her twin.

Budge quotes the Greek historian Plutarch (c. 46–120 AD), who described Nephthys as

“at first barren” (just as Plath’s ‘Other’ has “a womb of marble”), but as later having given birth to the Jackal-headed god Anubis, God of the Dead. And he wrote that the sistrum (the musical instrument which is the symbol of both Nephthys and Isis) was carved with “the effigies of a cat with a human visage” and had, on its lower edge, engravings of “on the one side the face of Isis, and on the other that of Nephthys”. He also wrote that “the Cat denotes the moon”.

The words of Isis and Nephthys were “Lamentations”, followed by “Festive Songs”. Plath’s words created a poem describing secrets, corruption and dismemberment, but in it the cut and the blood (which, in Rákóczi’s commentary on the card, presage the ultimate achievement of mystic knowledge and wisdom) are delivered by a “scratch” like that from one of the Goddesses’ cats. And the blood which is drawn, as in the cutting of a Gypsy initiate and in the dismemberment of Osiris, is “dark fruit”, “a cosmetic”: a wound which is necessary but “No, It is not fatal”.

Plath, writing in her journal when she was mourning the loss of Richard Sassoon, identified herself with Isis: “Then I was in my black coat and beret: Isis bereaved, Isis in search, walking a dark barren street”⁹. So, to identify her shadow-self as Nike/Nephthys – ‘the other’ – was most appropriate.

The above interpretation of the poem, however, does not explain all Plath’s imagery. Who is the man whose “parts” are assumed by Nike? Are we to read ‘assumes’ as ‘takes up’, as Nephthys took up the dismembered parts of Osiris and helped Isis to piece them together? If so, “a meathook” would be a cruel and unlikely tool for her to use, although perhaps appropriate to her dark, deathly powers. What are we to make of the “bright hair, shoe-black, old plastic”, which is part of a confession to the police, except that it indicates secrets? And what of the “stolen horses” linked so closely to “fornications”? Is that just a reference to the sexual energies often associated with horses and the stolen gratifications which characterize fornication and which are part of the Moon Goddess’s “abominations” which Plath described in ‘Thalidomide’?

The Egyptian’s use of the image of Nephthys on the canopic jars which held the lungs of the mummified deceased, might explain Plath’s image of Nike/Nephthys “sucking breath”, but nothing else about the couplet in which this occurs supports this.

In spite of the strong Ariel ‘voice’ of the speaker, and in spite of Plath’s careful construction of the poem, without some kind of help from the poet (Plath offered no comments on this poem) there are too many puzzles in the imagery for ‘The Other’ to be considered a good poem. This may have been the reason why Ted Hughes chose not to include it in his publication of Ariel.

The sisters Isis and Nephthys, however, and their intimate connection with wholeness and rebirth, are clearly appropriate to Plath’s own regenerative journey. And, having faced this shadowy aspect of her Spirit and acknowledged that it is an essential part of her Self, the next stage of the journey is to expose her Spirit to the all-powerful rays of the sun, which is the source of all life and growth in our world.

Yet, there is no obvious connection between 'The Other' and the next poem in her Ariel sequence, 'Stopped Dead' (dated 10 October 1962), which would be linked with The Sun (card 19) in the Tarot journey. And, according to the dates on Plath's manuscripts, some three months and six other Ariel poems separate these two poems from each other. Nor does 'Stopped Dead' seem to be a sun-filled poem. Rather, Frieda Hughes has identified it as one of Plath's "more lacerating poems", which her father left out of his publication of Ariel because it was about his maternal uncle, Walter Farrar¹⁰. This uncle was a prosperous mill owner who, with two of his brothers, produced "cords, moleskins, khakis"¹¹, all fabrics suitable for making trousers (or "pants", as Plath has it in her poem).

That Plath knew this uncle, who was very close to her husband¹², is clear from notes she wrote in 1956 for her story 'All the Dead Dears'¹³. And he seems to be the obvious target of the speaker's ire in 'Stopped Dead', where her sarcasm is directed at "Uncle, pants factory, Fatso, millionaire" – the capitalising of 'Fatso' and her description of him sunk, "still as a ham" in his "seven chins", being particularly nasty. Yet, many of the other images in the poem do not make sense of this attribution.

At one moment, with a "squeal of brakes", the speaker seems to describe a car accident, and yet the uncle is slumped in "a chair", rather than a car seat. And how does one explain a "dead drop" so high that the viewer seems to have a view like that from an aircraft and what should be scenery, or possibly a country, looks more like a seething cauldron of molten metals? What can we make of the speaker's urge to call the screaming of "a goddam baby" "a sunset"? Or of her comment that there is always "a bloody baby in the air"? Why in the air? And why should she think that this uncle might suspect her of wanting to murder him, like "Sad Hamlet, with a knife", when all she wants, it seems, is to carry off his soul?

Sun cardstrip

Does it help to look at some of the meanings and symbolism of The Sun card in the Tarot?

One meaning attributed to the card is that it represents a spiritual awakening, a sudden insight: a moment "rooted in immobility" in which "the newly awakened child" of the Spirit is offered, for a brief time, a sudden, brilliant vision of the world as a new and unfamiliar landscape¹⁴. Perhaps this is the dead stop of the poem's title: but the vision revealed seems far from mystical.

The card in traditional Tarot decks depicts two small, almost naked children, twins, who embrace each other and dance together in a walled garden under the full red and gold face of the sun. Drops of dew – life-giving moisture created by the sun – fall around them; and behind them the carefully built wall suggests that they are within a Paradisal garden (like the hidden, laughing children in T.S.Eliot's Four Quartets) and/or that they have stepped outside normal human boundaries and are now able to withstand the full, destructive, and creative power of the sun.

Rákóczi interprets this picture as showing “the Sun of Adepthood” shining on the new-born Adept, who “has the heart of a child” but is now “unified in his earthly persona and his higher individuality”¹⁵. In other words, the initiate has cleansed and re-united Body, Soul and Spirit and is now reborn as an Adept to whom the Mysteries will soon be revealed.

‘Stopped Dead’ contains a number of images which can be related to the sun but they come from a mixture of alchemical and mythological sources, few of which are depicted on the Tarot card.

uroborus

The car’s wheels – “two rubber grubs” which “bite their sweet tails” – perfectly describes the Uroborus, the snake biting its tail, which is an ancient alchemical and mystical symbol of Nature and its eternal cycle of life and death: and the sun is the source of everything in Nature.

The “Red and yellow, two passionate hot metals/ Writhing and sighing”, also perfectly describes an alchemical cauldron at the final stage of the purification process by which gross matter (sometimes called lead) is turned into gold. Red represents heat: yellow, light. Combined, they represent the sun, which is the alchemical symbol for gold. The “writhing and sighing” of these metals in Plath’s poem also conveys the double meanings of alchemical symbols, where the alchemical cauldron represents the human body in which the gross matter of the soul is purified in order to release Spiritual gold.

Having just dealt with the ‘twins’ Isis and Nephthys in ‘The Other’, the naked, reborn, twin children on the Tarot card of The Sun are appropriate to this stage of the journey, but Isis and Nephthys, in Egyptian genealogy (which is often muddled) are not only wife and sisters of Osiris but also nieces of the Sun God, Ra¹⁶. So these twins could call the Sun God, ‘uncle’; and the full, round sun, source of all, symbol of gold, could be seen as a ‘fatso, millionaire’.

In another mythology the Sun God, Phaeton, rode in a chariot (sometimes called a ‘car’).

And in yet another mythology, Mithras, the Sun God of a mystical sect specifically associated with Rome, would often, in his manifestation as our earthly sun, sink (perhaps red as a ham) in the seven hills of Rome.

Looking even further, Ra was commonly depicted as an eagle (as is the sun god in many mythologies) and his sons and grandsons were represented by the smaller bird of that family, the hawk. The speaker’s view of the landscape in ‘Stopped Dead’ is akin to the perspective of the bird in Ted Hughes’ early poem ‘The Hawk in the Rain’¹⁷. And in lines which were included in a recording of Plath reading her Ariel poems but were omitted from all the published versions of ‘Stopped Dead’, there is a suggestion of a roosting place suitable for a hawk but not an eagle:

You see I see a sort of twig
That might just hold me
But not you,
You're too big.¹⁸

The dead stop, the height, the unidentified landscape, the bloody baby linked with a sunset, the brief “visit”, all these things fit the Tarot card’s meanings; and some of Plath’s images seem to be drawn from alchemical and/or various mythological representations of the sun. However, once again, I feel that the above suggestions are unsatisfactory, and that they come from too many different sources to be convincing. Nor do they resolve all the puzzles. Why, for instance, should the speaker be suspected of wanting to kill this uncle and steal his soul, especially if he represents the sun which is the source of all life and which in Tarot presages the imminent achievement of the journeyer’s final goal?

Even if these puzzles were to be resolved, and if Plath was indeed making the Tarot journey and living it through the creation of her Ariel poems, then this poem is still too fixed in Plath’s own personal and emotional world to be a product of actual enlightenment. It may have been an attempt to imagine such an ‘awakening’ and what it would be like to see the world anew in the all-revealing rays of the sun. However, in seeming to describe an actual living person, and in doing so in such an unpleasant way, the poem demonstrates that Plath was still struggling to extricate herself from what her daughter called the “otherworldly, menacing landscape” in which her ferocious Ariel voice flourished¹⁹.

Unlike ‘Stopped Dead’, Plath’s next Ariel poem, ‘Poppies in October’, (dated 27 October 1962) is a superb interpretation of the mystical meaning of its matching Tarot card, Judgment (card 20).

Judgment cardstrip

Judgment is the card of revelation. Its occult, mystical meaning is of a sudden, overwhelming, direct communication from the Divine Creative Source. This, for the newly awakened Adept, represents a direct call to the Spirit (the Divine spark within them) to confront all that he or she has been and done in the world, and to use their new insight – their new knowledge of their own identity and powers – in their future interaction with others.

The Judgment card of most Tarot decks alludes to the Biblical Last Judgment: the ‘call’ is mediated by a great, winged angel who blows a golden trumpet, and three figures – mother, father and child – are seen emerging from an earthly grave.

In Plath’s poem, it is the poppies, their “skirts” brighter than the October morning “sun–clouds”, which trigger the speaker’s moment of revelation – a moment in which, as one Tarot text puts it, “the heart of the visionary expands” and the “perfect, jewel-like sublimity” of the infinite is revealed²⁰.

The title is like an exclamation of surprise at the sight of these flowers which usually bloom in mid-summer but which are flourishing in Autumnal October. And the brevity of the poem, the short, simple lines, the minimal punctuation, the sudden “astounding” blooming of the heart and the exclamation “Oh my God”, all convey the breathless wonder of the speaker.

In a world of sickness and pollution, where eyes are “dulled”, the poppies “cry open”: each bloom, like a rounded, red mouth crying out also resembles the trumpet of a Divine messenger which cries “open” to the tombs and brings clear vision to the Adept.

And, like the sick woman in the ambulance “whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly”, the speaker’s heart bursts with joy and wonder at this “love-gift” which has been brought to her so unexpectedly by the ephemeral, unearthly beauty of the poppies.

The speaker herself recognizes this transcendental moment and speaks directly to her God. And her question has two meanings depending on which word is emphasised: “who am I?” or “who am I?”: thus questioning her own nature and identity and/or questioning the reason why she, in particular, has been singled out to receive this revelation – this “gift”.

Plath’s careful construction of this poem reflects not only the occult meaning of the card, but also all its other symbolism. She includes God and mankind; sky and earth; the mundane and the ephemeral; life and death. Her sick woman, bowler-hatted men and the ‘I’ who is the newly awakened speaker reflect the three figures on the card, which represent the complete life-cycle in Nature – mother, father and child.

Unlike male poets and the male writers of Biblical texts, who choose the rose as a symbol of sacred and spiritual love, purity, and mystical redemption, Plath chose the poppy – the Goddesses’ flower, in which narcosis, enchantment, death and resurrection are all symbolised.

And, in the structure of her poem, her four tercets combine the four-square, earth-bound energies with the magical Goddess-linked power of three.

In Mystical lore it is love which brings revelation, redemption and renewal. Here, in Plath’s poem, it is a “gift, a love-gift”, which brings all the alchemical elements of the world together – sky, earth, air and water – so that renewal can take place. And it is this love-gift, and the wonder it engenders, which, in the final lines of the poem, calls the speaker from the “forest of frost” into the cornflower blue “dawn” of an October morning and presages a new beginning.

Real as the gift of flowers in ‘Poppies in October’ may seem, and real as this moment of revelation is made to feel, the gift might also be seen as Plath’s own creative gift which blossomed so extraordinarily in this poem and in her ‘Ariel’ poem, both of which she dated as having been written on her thirtieth birthday, 27 October, 1962.

World cardstrip

'The Courage of Shutting Up' (dated 2 October 1962) is the twenty-second poem in Plath's arrangement of her Ariel manuscripts. As such, it is the last poem of the Tarot journey and it is linked with the card of The World (card 21).

Perhaps because it was written before either 'Ariel' or 'Poppies in October', it shares none of the exhilaration and power of these poems. Nor does it express the peace, balance, and harmony which mark the completion of the journey and are an essential part of the meaning of The World card.

In most Tarot decks, The World depicts a beautiful, dancing woman, naked but for a loose veil which floats around her. She rests one foot on the earth and raises the other behind her in the air. In her hands she holds two wands, or batons, and around her is a wreath of laurel or flowers. In the four corners of the card, are the four symbols of the Biblical evangelists - eagle, lion, bull and angel. The nakedness of the dancing figure reflects the innocence of a new beginning, but this is no longer the innocence of The Fool: it is an innocence and openness born of self-knowledge, judgment and wisdom, and it expresses psychic wholeness – the re-integration of Body, Soul and Spirit.

The figure on the card dances in air but has not lost touch with the earth. She dances (to borrow a phrase from T.S.Eliot) at "the still point of the turning world"²¹. And the wreath around her is a symbol of victory, successful achievement and, also, it suggests the Cosmic Egg in which all chaos is brought to order.

The Adept now, in Rákóczi's words, is "Lord of all worlds above and below"²². The batons which the figure holds symbolize her magical power to re-unite all opposites, heaven and earth, active and passive. Her Spirit, now, joins with the four Alchemical world elements (air, fire, earth and water) which are represented in the corners of the card and which, as symbols of the Biblical evangelists, also represent the earthly power of mystical knowledge and teaching.

In Plath's poem, however, she seems still to "walk in a ring / A groove of old faults, deep and bitter", as she did in 'Event'²³: "Shutting up" or "quietness"²⁴, is not the result of peace and harmony but an act of "courage", and the speaker does not express any confidence that this is possible, nor does she resolve to do this. Instead, she rehearses the difficulties, dwelling on inner turmoil, the disturbed circling of the brain, the memories which revolve like gramophone records and which, in her imagination, segue into images of a surgeon, then a tattoo artist creating blue pictures which, "over and over", express the same "grievances".

The struggle to stay silent is expressed as a war. There is "artillery"; and "cannons", torture and death. The repetition and rhythm of "bastardies / Bastardies, usages, desertions and doubleness" and of "a tattooist / Tattooing over and over", emphasize the recurrence of old "grievances", echo the tramp of marching feet and reinforce the military images of warfare and death.

The tongue, too, is linked with warfare, blood and punishment. It is an “antique billhook” and, like the naval ‘cat’ used for flogging, it has “nine tails”. But it does not flog, it “flays”, which is a far more bloody and vicious. And the paronomasia of ‘tails’ and ‘tales’ suggests its capacity for story-telling, deception and lying.

Even the eyes are connected with warfare, torture, deception, “death-rays” and killing. “The eyes, the eyes, the eyes” are everywhere and, as mirrors of the Soul, they may also reflect the “terrible” tortured and deathly inner state of a man.

“Do not worry about the eyes”, the speaker tells us, yet their deadly “rays” (as if looks could kill) still belong to a country (a person) who is “obstinately independent” and who, although “insolvent”, still exists. “Insolvent”, too, has the double meaning of ‘impoverished’ and also, as ‘in solvent’, of being immersed in a solvent, i.e. something which may eventually dissolve it. Neither of these meanings, however, suggests that the ‘country’ has vanished. In spite of the “folded...flags” of the eyes, the closed mouth and the guarded tongue, the careful surgeon/tattooist – the person to whom these physical attributes belong – is still present and the dangers posed by the mind and the body still exist.

Rákóczi’s commentary on The World offers no help in deciphering this poem, nor do many other Tarot texts, most of which concentrate on the successful completion of the journey. In Alister Crowley’s words, for example, the card is “a glyph of the completion of the Great Work in its highest sense”; and just as “The Fool represents the negative issuing into manifestation” (i.e. birth and new beginnings at the start of the journey), so The World “is that manifestation, its purpose accomplished, ready to return”²⁵.

Crowley’s comment, however, does express something more than just completion. For the ordinary human being, the tarot journey is never-ending. As Ted Hughes put it at the end of his Alchemical journey of Cave Birds:²⁶

“At the end of the ritual

up comes a goblin”

The Fool who began the journey may be wiser and more self-aware by the stage at which The World is reached but she or he still carries the ‘baggage’ of a former life, and the future, with new joys and woes, must still be negotiated.

If Plath’s poem does represent The World of the Tarot, then she acknowledges this continuity. Her black disks resemble old gramophone records; her cannon and billhooks come from an earlier military age; her “engravings of Rangoon” and the stuffed animal heads “hung up” in the “library” suggests souvenirs of a past Colonial posting; and the folded flags belong to “a country no longer heard of”. All this suggest a past life. The task, now, is to live with that and to go forward into a future which will be shaped by lessons learned on this newly completed Tarot journey.

In the words of one of the few Tarot texts that do encompass this meaning, The World

"represents the synthesis of the long-sought spiritual experience with the processes of daily life"; and for the successful journeyer "a time comes to return to the World, where the experiences of spiritual encounter may be tested and manifested in the context of other living beings"²⁷.

In the light of my examination of the first twenty-two Ariel poems, I have to conclude that Plath did use the Tarot to order her Ariel manuscripts and that at least some of the poems were written with a particular Tarot card in mind. But given that the chronological order in which the poems were written is markedly different to the order in which the cards are arranged in a traditional Tarot journey, her method of using the cards is still a puzzle.

It is tempting to suggest that Plath followed the pattern of the Tarot journey in the traditional way, then dated her manuscripts some time after she wrote the poems in order to disguise what she was doing and to abide by the strictures on revealing occult secrets. Plath's copy of *The Painted Caravan* was well used and she would certainly have read Rákóczi's opening remarks, in which he spells out the "outer and inner pledge of secrecy" imposed on any Gypsy who uses the Tarot, and the penalties for violating this pledge, which include the psychological penalty of "a terrible disruption of mental powers"²⁸. Plath would certainly have wanted to avoid that.

Ted Hughes, as well as noting that Plath's Ariel manuscripts were "carefully ordered"²⁹, wrote that from the first Ariel poem Plath "suddenly started saving all the draft pages, which she had never bothered about before. She not only saved them, she dated them carefully". At the same time, he commented "I don't know how grossly she might have exaggerated, but there certainly were days when she wrote three poems, or rather finished three"³⁰.

Plath's journals confirm her propensity for exaggerating, but the evidence of the Smith College Ariel archive³¹ does not support a supposition that she had any ulterior motive in keeping and dating all her drafts, or that she deliberately misdated all those poems.

In the Smith College Archive, unlike the poems written before 'Little Fugue' (dated 2 April 1962) and those written after 'Mary's Song' (dated 19 Nov. 1962), each group of drafts for each poem written between 2 April 1962 and 2 December 1963 (except for 'The Other') contains holographs (hand-written) and/or typescripts written on pink Smith College Memorandum paper.

In addition to this, the majority of these holographs and typescripts have draft pages of *The Bell Jar*, Version 2. on the verso, and many of these pages from *The Bell Jar* are in reversed but consecutive order following the chronology of the dates on the Ariel poems.

For example:

'The Courage of Shutting up'

'The Bee Meeting'
'The Arrival of the Bee Box'

'Stings'
'The Swarm'
'Wintering'

2 Oct. 1962
3 Oct. 1962
4 Oct. 1962

6 Oct. 1962
7 Oct. 1962
9 Oct. 1962
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2

Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Verso: The Bell Jar, version 2
Ch.6
Ch.6
Ch.6
Ch.5
Ch.5
Ch.4
Ch.4. pp.3,4
pp.2,6,7,10,11,12
pp.9,8
pp.11
pp.1,2,5,6,7,8
pp.7,8,9,10,11,12,13
pp.5,6,8,9

One consecutively dated group of poems – 'A Secret', 'The Applicant', 'Daddy', 'Medusa', 'The Jailor' and 'Lesbos' (dated 1962 October 11,12,16,17,18 respectively) – stands out as being different, because it has drafts of Ted Hughes' unpublished play, The Calm, on each verso. And there are several other anomalies in this seemingly regular pattern shown by the Smith College Ariel Archive drafts, although whether these are significant is debatable.

There are no holographs in the Smith archive for 'Magi', 'Morning Song', 'Barren Woman' or 'Tulips', all of which were written before January 1962, and all of which were included amongst the first twenty-two Ariel poems³².

'The Other' exists as undated holograph pages numbered by Plath 1 – 5, the verso of

which are typescript pages of poems “probably from *The Colossus*”. The date ascribed to ‘*The Other*’ first appears on a typescript which has been numbered by Plath as page 6 and which also has part of a *Colossus* poem on the verso. Unlike all the other 1962 poems, none of the Smith College manuscripts for this poem are on pink Smith College Memorandum paper. This is also one of the very few poems not written on recycled drafts of *The Bell Jar*.

The first undated holograph pages of ‘*Death & Co.*’ (1 un-numbered and one numbered ‘2’ by Plath) and one undated typescript page (numbered 3); plus the first dated typescript page (dated 12 November 1962, and numbered 4), are all on pink Smith College Memorandum paper and have nothing on the verso.

However, four further undated, un-numbered typescript pages of ‘*Death & Co.*’ have the poems ‘*Totem*’, ‘*The Munich Mannequins*’, ‘*Child*’ and ‘*Paralytic*’ on the verso, all of which were written in 1963. ‘*Gigolo*’ (also written in 1963), occurs on the verso of yet another ‘*Death & Co.*’ typescript but this time the poem is marked “revised 1962 Nov 12”.

Since notes for ‘*Death & Co.*’, typed by Plath and dated 13 Dec. 1962, are included amongst others written for Douglas Cleverdon for a BBC programme of new poems, it seems that the 1963 poems were written later, on recycled draft sheets of ‘*Death & Co.*’. Yet, this suggests that there may well have been more drafts than are currently held in the archive.

One other poem raises a similar possibility. ‘*Thalidomide*’ exists in the Smith College Archive as four, undated, holograph pages on pink Smith College Memorandum paper with nothing on the verso of any of these pages. Two typescripts, similarly on pink paper with nothing on the verso are dated 1962 Nov.4. But one further typescript, revised but undated, has the 1963 poem ‘*Balloons*’ on the verso.

In the end, the way in which Plath approached the Tarot when writing her Ariel poems and arranging her Ariel manuscripts is impossible to determine. My guess is that she was inspired by *The Painted Caravan* and began to use the Tarot cards in a random way to prompt her imagination. Then, at some stage, she recognized that her own long quest to find healing through her writing was paralleled in the Tarot journey and that this could be one more aid (a powerful magical aid, too) to achieving her goal: so, she decided to order her poems to conform with it. Many of her poems, like ‘*Morning Song*’ and ‘*Tulips*’, already suited particular stages in the Tarot journey but some poems she revised and rewrote; and some she wrote specifically for a particular stage and card, and later inserted them among her manuscripts.

Words, as Plath wrote are like axes. The echoes of their strokes can travel “off from the centre like horses”³³. And there are so many echoes in Plath’s poetry – echoes of her life, the people she knew, her loves and her hates; echoes of mythology, folk-tales and magic – that her poems can mean many different things to many different people. Perhaps she did use the Tarot in Ariel, perhaps not. Whatever one believes about that,

Plath's Ariel poems are remarkable poems written, as Ted Hughes said, "with the full power and music of her extraordinary nature". Ariel, as he also said, "is not easy poetry to criticize. It is not much like any other poetry". But "It is her... It is just like her – but permanent"³⁴.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', Winter Pollen, p.187.
2. Winter Pollen, p.188.
3. Kukil, K. (ed.) The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 26 February 1956, p.212.
4. Rákóczi, B. The Painted Caravan, pp.63-4.
5. Egyptologist Wallis Budge writes that the 'House' was interpreted as being the night sky but may be a temple or abode. This Goddess is also known as Nebt-Heb (Lady of the body). Budge, The Gods of the Egyptians, Vol.2, Dover Publications, N.Y. 1969, pp.254-60.
6. Budge, W. The Gods of the Egyptians, Vol 2. p.258.
7. Isis is better known as Osiris's wife but she was both his wife and his sister. Nephthys was sister to Isis and Osiris, and sister and wife of Seth.
8. Budge, W. The Gods of the Egyptians, Vol 2, p.255.
9. Kukil, K. (ed.), The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 10 March 1956, p.234.
10. Hughes, F. Foreword to Ariel: The Restored Edition, p.xvi.
11. Ted Hughes describes these brothers' mill-products in his poem 'Sacrifice', Keegan, P.(ed.) Ted Hughes Collected Poems, Faber, 2003, pp.758-60.
12. In a letter to János Csokits, Ted Hughes described Walter Farrar as "My uncle – the patriarch of my family and one of my dearest friends". Reid, C.(ed.) Letters of Ted Hughes, May 1976, p.376.
13. Plath's journal notes for 'All the Dead Dears', which was later published in Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams (Faber, 1979, p.177-84.), include "central tragic figure – Uncle W". Kukil, K.(ed.) The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 31[a] 1956, p.580.
14. Irwin, L. Gnostic Tarot, Samuel Weiser Inc, 1998, p.320.
15. Rákóczi, B. The Painted Caravan, p.64.

16. Isis, Nephthys and Osiris were all born of Light (Shu) and Air (Tefnut), Earth (Geb) and Sky(Nut), all of which were created by and from the Sun–God, Ra. Osiris, however, came to be regarded, and worshipped, as the dark brother of Ra. He was in charge of the Underworld, as Ra was in charge of the Upper world. As Osiris’s brother, Ra became uncle to Isis and Nephthys.

17. Ted Hughes: Collected Poems, p.19.

18. Quoted by John Hopkins, Tuesday March 23, in the on–line Sylvia Plath Forum, March 1999. The reading can be heard on YouTube in ‘Sylvia Plath reads from Ariel (2)’.

19. Hughes, F. Foreword to Ariel: The Restored Edition, p.xii.

20. Irwin, L. Gnostic Tarot, pp.326-7.

21. Eliot, T.S. Four Quartets, Faber, 1972, p.15.

22. Rákóczi, B. The Painted Caravan, p.67.

23. Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, Faber, 1981, p.195.

24. An alternative title for this poem before publication was ‘The Courage of Quietness’.

25. Crowley, A. The Book of Thoth, Weiser, Maine, 1985, p.118.

26. Ted Hughes: Collected Poems, p.440.

27. Irwin, L. Gnostic Tarot, p.330.

28. Rákóczi, B. The Painted Caravan, p.8. Such vows of secrecy are common in Western mystical tradition; and the maxim often adopted by the Magus (the Master) is “To Know, to Will, to Dare, and to be Silent”. This maxim was first recorded in Transcendental Magic by Eliphas Levi (1810-1975), whose extensive study of mysticism and magic was certainly known to Ted Hughes.

29. Hughes, T. ‘Sylvia Plath and Her Journals’, Winter Pollen, p.189.

30. Hughes, T. ‘Publishing Sylvia Plath’, Winter Pollen, p.167.

31. I am grateful to Karen Kukil, Associate Curator of Special Collections, William Allan Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA, for providing me with a draft of her finding aid for the Sylvia Plath Collection. My information about the Ariel holographs and typescripts is drawn from this draft.

32. ‘Magi’ and ‘Morning Song’ (though not a complete run of manuscripts/typescripts)

are held by the Lilly Library, as is 'Barren Woman' under an earlier title, 'Small Hours'. 'Tulips' is held by Harvard. Plath sent the worksheets for 'Tulips' to Jack Sweeney on 22 August 1961; and the other three poems were part of the 'scrap paper' Plath sold to Indiana University through a London bookseller in November 1961. (Thanks to Peter Steinberg for this information).

33. 'Words', Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, p.270.

34. Hughes, T. 'Sylvia Plath: Ariel', Winter Pollen, p.162.

Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot text and illustrations. © Ann Skea 12 January 2013. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

Go to Ann Skea's Homepage

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Birthday Letters: Poetry and Magic.

An analysis of Ted Hughes' use of Tarot and Cabbala in Birthday Letters.

1. Introduction

'Fulbright Scholars', 'Caryatids (1)', 'Caryatids (2)'.

Includes The Path of the Hanged Man

MEM - 'Fidelity', 'Astringency', 'The Rag Rug', 'The Ventriloquist'.

2. The Path of The Fool

ALEPH - 'Fulbright Scholars', 'Chaucer', 'Isis', 'Dreamers'.

3. The Path of The Magician

BETH - 'Caryatids (2)', 'Ouija', 'Ephiphany', 'Fairy Tale'.

4. The Path of The High Priestess

GIMEL - 'Caryatids (1)', 'The Earthenware Head', 'The Gypsy', 'The Blackbird'.

5. The Path of The Empress

DALETH - 'Visit', 'Wuthering Heights', 'A Dream', 'Totem'.

6. The Path of The Emperor

HE - 'Sam', 'The Chipmunk', 'The Minotaur', 'Robbing Myself'.

7. The Path of The Hierophant

VAU - 'The Tender Place', 'Horoscope', 'The Pan', 'Blood and Innocence'.

8. The Path of The Lovers

ZAIN - 'St. Botolph's', 'Flounders', 'The Error', 'Costly Speech'.

9. The Path of The Chariot

CHETH - 'The Shot', 'The Blue Flannel Suit', 'The Lodger', 'The Inscription'.

10. The Path of Justice

TETH - 'Trophies', 'Child's Park', 'Daffodils', 'Night Ride on Ariel'.

11. The Path of The Hermit

YOD - '18 Rugby Street', '9 Willow Street', 'The Afterbirth', 'Telos'.

12. The Path of The Wheel of Fortune

KAPH - 'The Machine', 'The Literary Life', 'Setebos', 'Brasilia'.

13. The Path of Strength

LAMED - 'God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark', 'The Bird', 'A Short Film', 'The Cast'.

14. The Path of the Hanged Man

MEM - 'Fidelity', 'Astringency', 'The Rag Rug', 'The Ventriloquist'.

This Path was dealt with as part of the Introduction.

15. The Path of Death

NUN - 'Fate Playing', 'The Badlands', 'The Table', 'Life after Death'.

16. The Path of Temperance

SAMEKH - 'The Owl', 'Fishing Bridge', 'Apprehensions', 'The Hands'.

17. The Path of The Devil

A'AIN - 'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress', 'The 59th Bear', 'Dream Life', 'The Prism'.

18. The Path of The Tower

PE - 'Your Paris', 'Grand Canyon', 'Perfect Light', 'The God'.

19. The Path of The Star

TZADDI - 'You Hated Spain', 'Karlsbad Caverns', 'The Rabbit Catcher', 'Freedom of Speech'.

20. The Path of The Moon

QOPH - 'Moonwalk', 'Black Coat', 'Suttee', 'A Picture of Otto'.

21. The Path of The Sun

RESH - 'Drawing', 'Portraits', 'The Bee God', 'Fingers'.

22. The Path of Judgment

SHIN - 'Fever', 'Stubbing Wharfe', 'Being Christlike', 'The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother'.

23. The Path of The World

TAU - '55 Eltisley', 'Remission', 'The Beach', 'Red'.

Poetry and Magic text and illustrations. © Ann Skea 2015. For permission to quote any part of any of the documents linked to this page contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional

Ted Hughes: London Walks – Bloomsbury and Primrose Hill

© Ann Skea 2019.

Map 1: Bloomsbury – Holborn

Bloomsbury Map Russell Square

1. Russell Square Underground Station (Piccadilly Line)

The Bloomsbury – Holborn walk begins and ends at the Russell Square Underground station. All venues on this walk are within a 10–15 minute easy walk of each other.

Russell Square

2. Faber & Faber (1929–1971), 24 Russell Square.

From 1929 to 1971, Faber & Faber premises were at 24 Russell Square. The main entrance was round the corner from the Square itself, in Thornhaugh Street. Originally the premises were chosen by Geoffrey Faber for the expansion of the Scientific Press. In September 1925, the press then became Faber & Gwyer Ltd. When Geoffrey Faber chose this house in Bloomsbury (partly for its literary connections) he described it as "rather a fine house; we have got to build up as fine a publishing house as we can to inhabit it"¹. Tom Eliot (T.S.Eliot), who was then Editor of the Criterion and had already published most of his best-known poetry, was appointed to the Board of the publishing firm at that time.

In 1957, Ted Hughes wrote to Faber & Faber asking if they might be willing to publish *Hawk In the Rain*, which had just won the First Publication Award in a contest sponsored by the New York City Poetry Center. Having read the book, Eliot scribbled a note to Faber's poetry editor saying that he was "inclined to think we ought to take this man now"².

So, from 1957 until his death in 1998, Hughes was a 'Faber poet'. The famous photograph of Hughes, glass in hand among the greats – MacNeice, Eliot, Auden and Spencer – was taken in the Russell Square house.

St George Martyr

3. The Church of St. George the Martyr, 44 Queen's Square.

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were married in this church on June 16, 1956 – "Bloomsday": 'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress' (THCP 1064)

Both Ted and Sylvia referred to the church of St. George the Martyr as the Church of the Chimney Sweeps. For Sylvia, this seemed a romantic designation. In England a chimney sweep at a wedding was always considered to be a lucky omen.

ChimneySweep

Inside the church, this nineteenth century plaque records the donation of £1,000 by a

parishioner for the provision of Christmas Dinner for London chimney sweeps. Generous as this seems, it exemplifies the sort of piety of which William Blake wrote so angrily in his poem, 'The Chimney Sweeper' (Songs of Experience). In the 1800s, chimney sweeps were children, apprenticed at the age of seven or eight, to climb through the narrow, tortuous, maze-like chimney flues of London houses. Many died of suffocation. By the age of twelve, most had grown too big for this work and they were crippled, stunted and ill, often with cancer of the scrotum.

Chimney Sweep memorial

A second plaque, erected in 1810 and dedicated to James South Esq., records his founding of the Chimney Sweep Charity.

Many of these children were treated at the nearby Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children. In 1929, James Barrie, creator of Peter Pan, gifted his copyright of Peter Pan (books, plays, and films) to the hospital, and the hospital legally holds the right to any royalty from Peter Pan in perpetuity.

Part of the church has now been partitioned off to make a small cafe and you can see inside through its large glass windows. The cafe is currently closed due to restoration work but the church is open Tuesdays to Thursdays 10.00 - 12.00 unless booked for an event (Sept. 2023).

Faber Offices

4. Faber & Faber (1971-2008), 3 Queen's Square.

Ted Hughes: Selected Poems 1957-1967 was the first of Ted Hughes's books to be published after Faber moved to these premises. Every book after that (apart from limited editions), including plays, books for children and, of course, Birthday Letters, was published from here. Hughes would have known this building well.

Jubilee Urn

5. Queen's Silver Jubilee 1977, flower urn.

In 1978 Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin were commissioned to write short poems celebrating the Queen's Silver Jubilee. These were inscribed on paving stones which are set at the foot of this urn. Ted Hughes's poem was later published as 'Solomon's Dream' in the preface to Rain Charm for a Duchy (Faber, 1992)(THCP 802). The stone on which it is inscribed is damaged and moss-covered.

6. 18 Rugby Street.

This flat was rented by Daniel Huws' father who passed it on to his son, Daniel, who used it regularly as a pied-à-terre during college recesses, then later as his home after he was married. Daniel Huws and Ted Hughes became friends whilst studying at Cambridge University and Ted, who completed his degree before Daniel, moved to

London and lived in the Huws's flat. For a time, Hughes worked as a reader for the film magnate, J. Arthur Rank, probably at Rank's nearby Mayfair premises.

Lucas Myers, in an unpublished manuscript now held in the Pembroke College Ted Hughes archive, remembers that the house was damaged during the 2nd World War air-raids and was condemned, but that each of the four flats was occupied. He also notes that Dan Huws remembers Hughes rejoicing in the fact that Dylan Thomas had once visited the house.

18 Rugby Street

Hughes's first night with Sylvia Plath was spent at 18 Rugby Street, and he memorialised it in his Birthday Letters poem, '18 Rugby Street' (THCP 1055-8). He continued to live there, making frequent trips to Cambridge, until Plath broke the news of their marriage to her college. In December 1959, after their return from America, Hughes and Plath lived at 18 Rugby Street until they found a flat of their own close to Primrose Hill.

Susan Alliston, who was a secretary, then a reader, at Faber & Faber, is also mentioned in the poem '18 Rugby Street': ("Ten years had to darken....before Susan / Could pace the floor above night after night"). She died of Hodgkin's lymphoma in 1969 and after her death Daniel Huws and Ted Hughes found her poetry manuscripts in her flat. Hughes' 'Introduction' (written in 1980) and some of her poems were published in the Saint Botolph's Review No.23. In his 'Introduction', Hughes described how he first met Susan in a lift at Faber & Faber, and how he had got to know her after meeting her again, with friends, in The Lamb. After this she became his close friend for six years⁴. Susan is the subject of the Gaudete Epilogue poems which begin "I know well / You are not infallible//... " and "waving goodbye from your banked hospital bed,... "(THCP 368, 364).

Jim Downer, a commercial artist, was living in one of the flats at 18 Rugby Street when Hughes first lived there. He had written and illustrated a story called 'Timmy the Tug', which he showed to Hughes. Hughes offered to write his own verse version of the story but the draft of the book got mislaid until Carol Hughes re-discovered it at Court Green. Timmy the Tug, written by Hughes and illustrated by Downer, was published by Thames & Hudson in 2009 .

Richard Hollis, the graphic designer who collaborated with Hughes and Daniel Weissbort to design and produce the magazine Modern Poetry in Translation, also lived at 18 Rugby Street. He remembers Hughes and Plath but never knew that Sylvia, too, was a poet. He saw her only as "a sort of homebody... who used to just sit doing domestic things, sewing and so on".

The above quotation comes from an interview with Richard Hollis which is held in Soundcloud. A link to this interview can be found, along with more interviews, photographs, and information about the house and its occupants, on Bobby Williams' web pages at <https://18rugbystreet.co.uk/>.

The Lamb

7. The Lamb, 94 Lamb's Conduit Street.

The Lamb has long been the haunt of poets and writers and it was the much-frequented 'local' pub for those who lived at (or visited) 18 Rugby Street. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath often met their friends there, and Dylan Thomas, Thom Gunn, Jaques Tati, and Peter O'Toole were among the Rugby Street visitors who probably drank there. In earlier years, the Bloomsbury Set knew it well and Charles Dickens, who lived nearby in Doughty Street from 1837–1841, is said to have frequented it. It still has a Victorian interior with etched glass 'snob screens' which can be opened and closed to ensure privacy by separating well-to-do customers from the bar staff.

Map 2: Chalk Farm – Primrose Hill

Primrose Hill MapChalk Farm

1. Chalk Farm Underground Station (Northern Line)

This walk begins and ends at the Chalk Farm Underground station. If you are coming from Russell Square Underground Station you will need to change to the Northern Line at Kings Cross St Pancras. The journey takes about 15 minutes. All venues on this walk are within a 10-15 minute easy walk of each other.

The exit from Chalk Farm Underground Station is in Adelaide Road. Turn right, cross the road, and take the first turning on the left into Regent's Park Road (also called 'Bridge Approach' on some maps).

'The Offers' (THCP 1180–3)

"I got on the Northern Line at Leicester Square
And sat down and there you were... ."

"If you got out at Chalk Farm, I told myself,
I would follow you home..."

"Chalk Farm came. I got up. You stayed".

ChalcotSquare

2. No.3 Chalcot Square.

In January 1960, Hughes signed a lease for the third-floor flat at 3 Chalcot Square. He told Aurelia and Warren Plath that it was "a pleasant very light flat with one bedroom, one living room, one kitchen, and a bathroom". (THL 156). Hughes's writing space was

a small alcove in the entrance hall, where he wrote on a collapsible card-table. He told Lucas Myers that it was the best workspace ever, but Bill Merwin described it as a 'black hole'.

In a letter to Esther and Leonard Baskin, Hughes described the flat as having "an excellent zoo, starting within 100 yards. We hear the seals regularly & occasionally the lions and wolves." (THL 160). A few years later, Hughes told George Macbeth: "wolves howl in concert, in harmony, and for pleasure" (THL 244).

Black Isis
'The Howling of Wolves' (THCP 180)

Is without world.

What are they dragging up and out on their long leashes of sound
That dissolve in the mid-air silence?...

Frieda Hughes was born here on April 1st 1960. Hughes wrote 'Lines To A Newborn Baby' (THCP 96).

Lupercal was published in March 1960.

One of the pictures Hughes hung in the flat for inspiration was an unframed alchemical image of Black Isis.

Fitzroy Road
3. No.23 Fitzroy Road.

In December 1962, after Hughes and Plath had separated, Plath moved in to this house in which W.B.Yeats had once lived: "Well here I am! Safely in Yeats's house!" (LSP 927). Plath rented the top two floors of the house (a mansard roof with extra rooms has since been added).

On February 11th 1963, Sylvia Plath committed suicide.

Hughes immediately moved into the house to look after Frieda and Nicholas. For a short time, his aunt Hilda also helped. Then he employed a nanny. Warren Plath and his wife stayed in the flat shortly after Sylvia's death, Aurelia Plath visited in June, and Frieda went to pre-school from there. Assia Wevill lived there with Hughes and the children between May and September 1963, when Hughes and the children moved back to Court Green. Assia then lived there with David Wevill until April 1964.

In the pain-filled Birthday Letters poem, 'Life after Death' (THCP 1160), Hughes wrote of the effects of Sylvia's death on the children and himself. Again the wolves at the zoo can be heard:

"We were comforted by wolves.
Under that February moon and the moon of March
The Zoo had come close."

"Wolves consoled us. Two or three times each night
For minutes on end
They sang."

"The wolves lifted us in their long voices.
They wound us and enmeshed us
In their wailing for you, their mourning for us,
They wove us into their voices".

St George's Terrace
4. No.11 St.George's Terrace

The American poet, Bill Merwin, who was living in London with his wife, Dido, had become friendly with Ted Hughes. Dido had helped the Hughes's find and furnish the flat in Chalcot Square, and had introduced Sylvia (who was heavily pregnant) to her doctor. Bill, aware of the cramped and difficult condition in which Ted worked, offered Ted the use of his study whilst he and Dido were away at their farm in France. Between July and September 1960, Ted used this study to write his "tragifarcical melodrama in very rough verse" (LTH 163). This is probably the unpublished play, 'The House of Aries'. Sylvia (unknown to Bill) also used Bill's study and wrote *The Bell Jar*.

REFERENCES

- 1 Toby Faber, *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*, Faber, 2019. p.11.
2. Toby Faber, *op. cit.* p. 247.
3. David Andrews Ross and Daniel Weissbort (eds.), *Saint Botolph's Review*, No.2, Viper Press, 2006.
- 4 Richard Hollis (ed.), *Susan Alliston: Poems and Journals 1960-1969*, Five Leaves Publications, Nottingham, 2010. This contains an 'Introduction' by Ted Hughes. It also contains diary entries of Alliston's early impression of Hughes when she met him with friends at The Lamb.

© Ann Skea 1 September 2019. For permission to quote any part of this document contact Dr Ann Skea at ann@skea.com

[Return to The Ted Hughes Homepage for more options](#)

[Go to Ann Skea's Homepage](#)

Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalThe Ted Hughes Society

Promoting the Scholarly Reading and Discussion of the work of Ted Hughes

[NewsAbout](#)

[Journal](#)

[PodcastEvents](#)

[Ted Hughes: Life and Work](#)

[Research](#)

[ContactJoin](#)

[New Issue of the Journal of the Ted Hughes Society](#)

[July 29, 2025](#)

The new issue of Ted Hughes Studies: The Journal of the Ted Hughes Society (Volume 10, Issue 1) is now available for download.

[Contents](#)

[Editorial](#)

[Capriccio: Consolation and Absolute Music](#) Sophie Garnett

[Ted Hughes's Tales from Ovid: Translation as a Poetic Dialogue with the Roman Poet](#)
Lorena Bruno Mundim Phillips

['And of course it can be taught': Ted Hughes as Teacher](#) Di Beddow

[The Correspondence of Ted Hughes and Peter Redgrove](#) Neil Roberts

[Ted Hughes and Keith Douglas: Brotherhood, Absence and Elegy](#) Catherine Macnaughton

[Conference Postponed](#)

[July 24, 2025](#)

For logistical reasons, the international conference on the legacy of Ted Hughes has been postponed. The conference will now take place at Pembroke College, Cambridge from 15th-18th September 2026. A renewed call for papers will be issued via this website and in the Society's newsletter "Recklings" in autumn 2025.

[Recklings - Issue 1](#)

July 19, 2024

We're delighted to announce the publication of Recklings, a quarterly bulletin for Ted Hughes Society members. The first issue was published at the Summer Solstice, featuring a mixture of thoughts, news, reviews and recommendations from a diverse and interesting community of Hughes enthusiasts.

If you're a member, you'll have received a link to access the bulletin last month. If you're not yet a member, [click here](#) for details of how you can become one.

New Issue of the Ted Hughes Society Journal
March 26, 2024

The new issue of the Ted Hughes Society Journal has just been published and is available as an open access download [here](#) - Volume 9, issue 2 (2024) ISSN 2051-7270 (Download)

Contents include:

Little Cub Hierophant: Shamanic Election, Magical Flight and Ted Hughes's Protagonist of Crow Michael Jones

Ted Hughes – 'No Falsifying Dream' Mike Sweeting

Ted Hughes, the Chthulucene, the Cyborg and the child audience Jessica De Waal

Review Article: The Letters of Seamus Heaney Mark Wormald

Reviews

Ted Hughes: Two Events in Commemoration and Tribute
October 28, 2023

Ted Hughes died on 28th October 1998. Twenty-five years on, two events are being held to mark this anniversary. The first, 'Re-reading Lupercal', coincides with the publication of a new 'heritage edition' of Hughes's great second collection and takes place at the British Library on 7 November. The event promises an evening of conversation chaired by Carol Hughes in which the poets Alice Oswald and Zaffar Kunial and the novelist Jane Feaver will discuss what remains one of Hughes's most popular and influential books.

Further details of the event can be found on the British Library website. The event is in-person, and tickets can be booked through the British Library.

A week later, on the evening of 14 November, the Ted Hughes Society and the Elmet Trust will be hosting a joint online shared reading from and discussion of the poet's

work. The event is for members of the Society and the Trust only. To join the Society click [here](#); to learn more about the Elmet Trust visit their website. Details of the evening will be circulated in due course to Society and Trust members.

'Re-reading Luperkal' - British Library Event September 29, 2023

The British Library has announced an event which will be of interest to all readers of Ted Hughes. To mark the publication of the new 'heritage edition' of Hughes's second collection *Luperkal*, on the 7th November 2024 the Library is hosting 'Re-reading *Luperkal*', an evening of conversation chaired by Carol Hughes in which the poets Alice Oswald and Zaffar Kunial and the novelist Jane Feather will discuss what remains one of Hughes's most popular and influential books.

Further details of the event can be found on the British Library website. The event is in-person, and tickets can be booked through the British Library.

Call for Papers - Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity March 2, 2023

The Ted Hughes Network have issued a call for papers for a symposium, jointly organised with the British Library, entitled *Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity*, to be held at the British Library on Friday 15th September 2023.

As the Call for Papers explains:

This symposium is designed to explore and investigate the claim that Hughes's most characteristic, distinctive, and innovative work—wherein lies the weight of his claim to be regarded as a major poet and an internationally significant artist—is essentially Expressionist, characterised by a rejection of objectivity in representation in favour of a Visionary Subjectivity that draws on inner life and imagination to transform and distort content, deploying abstraction, typologies and symbols to shape presentations in an essentially didactic manner.

Full details on the Symposium can be found [here](#) on the Call for Papers, and the deadline for submission is Friday 12th May 2023.

New Issue of the Ted Hughes Society Journal August 30, 2022

The Ted Hughes Society is delighted to announce the publication of a new issue of the *Ted Hughes Society Journal*.

This issue of the *Journal*, whilst much-delayed, arrives just in time for the 9th International Ted Hughes Conference (7th-9th September 2022, University of Huddersfield) and features a range of new essays including: Ann Skea discussing 'The Sorrows of the Deer', Catherine Macnaughton on Hughes's engagement with *Phèdre*,

Maria Kaminska's exploration of irony in Zbigniew Herbert and Crow, and Mark Wormald on the place of John Montague in the web of friendships connecting Barrie Cooke, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes.

Alongside these substantial essays you'll find reviews of works including Heather Clark's *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*.

The journal is open access and can be found [here](#).

The Ted Hughes Society Podcast - Episode 1: 'The Catch' (part 1)
July 20, 2022

The Ted Hughes Society is delighted to announce the launch of our new monthly podcast: The Ted Hughes Society Podcast.

Hosted by the Society's Secretary, Mick Gowar, the first three podcast episodes will feature recordings from the recent launch reading and discussion of society chair Mark Wormald's excellent new book *The Catch*, and will include contributions from poet, critic and priest Malcolm Guite, author and storyteller Martin Shaw, scholars and writers Terry Gifford and Katherine Robinson, and of course Mark himself. There will also be contributions from writers, critics and storytellers who were not present at the launch event, but nevertheless have interesting insights to contribute to the project of 'fishing for Ted Hughes'.

Future episodes will include discussions with leading Hughes scholars, interviews and other material.

The podcast can be accessed through all the major podcast platforms, such as Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Acast.

The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes - Event Recording Now Available
June 17, 2022

In April 2022, the Society hosted the first public reading and discussion of *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes*, the critically-acclaimed book by Mark Wormald.

Whilst this event was only available to members of the Ted Hughes Society at the time, we have now made the recording available through our Youtube channel:

For more information on the event and the participants, please visit the dedicated Event page.

Mark Hinchcliffe Collection Acquired by University of Huddersfield
June 7, 2022

In an exciting development which holds very significant potential for future study of the

work of Ted Hughes, the University of Huddersfield recently announced that it has acquired the substantial Hughes collection of the late poet, scholar and member of the Ted Hughes Society, Mark Hinchcliffe.

Ceramic jaguar sculpture made by Ted Hughes, included in the Mark Hinchcliffe Collection at the University of Huddersfield

The collection will be freely available to the public for research at the University's Heritage Quay Archive, and includes some truly outstanding items. As Steve Ely, director of the Ted Hughes Network at the University of Huddersfield explained:

We're delighted to have acquired Mark Hinchcliffe's outstanding collection. It comprises over one hundred and seventy items, including signed first editions of dozens of Hughes's trade, limited-edition and fine-press publications; original letters written by Hughes and his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath; signed and annotated books from Hughes's personal collection; and, some absolutely unique items: a very fine ceramic jaguar sculpted by Hughes in 1967, the only intact example anywhere in the world of Hughes's work in the plastic arts; an album containing hundreds of photographs, including some previously unknown photographs of both Hughes and Plath; a holograph manuscript of the radio play 'Orpheus & Eurydice' with some significant differences to the broadcast and published versions, and, a bespoke edition of the Gehenna Press's limited edition *Howls & Whispers*, comprising the original fine-book, 8 original watercolours by Leonard Baskin and a unique copper-plate, engraved portrait of Sylvia Plath

A long-time member and former chair of the Elmet Trust, Mark Hinchcliffe is much-missed in the community of Ted Hughes scholarship, and it is a fitting tribute to his years of devoted study that his collection will now afford future generations of scholars a unique and exciting entry into such crucial aspects of Hughes's life and work.

The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes - Now Published
April 28, 2022

Today (28th April 2022) marks the publication of *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* (Bloomsbury) the long-awaited book by Mark Wormald, the Chair of the Ted Hughes Society and Fellow of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

The book had its first public reading and discussion at a Ted Hughes Society online event earlier this week, and a recording of this event will be made available soon.

Mark has also read from and spoken about the book under the auspices of Orvis (the leading fly-fishing brand) and you can see this event here:

The book has already started to receive laudatory reviews, with Alex Diggins in *The*

Critic observing that the book

is most convincing as an account of care, love even: for fish, but most significantly for the rivers they swim through. You can't shake the feeling that the most central relationship Hughes had was with his two beloved home rivers, the Taw and the Torridge, in Devon. Knowing how quickly rivers sicken, he became vocally involved in their protection [...] Wormald, like Hughes, is intensely alert to fishing as a calendar of time's helter-skelter rush.

And Cal Flyn writing in *The Times* that

In *The Catch*, Wormald offers a partial biography of the former poet laureate [...] by filleting Hughes's literary output – specifically, the long and complicated genesis of his 1983 collection *River* and the poet's private fishing journals. The result is a fine book, penetrating and poetic, filled with honeyed prose and thoughtful criticism.

Those interested in experiencing what is a deeply moving, personal book as well as a brilliant exposition of a whole aspect of Hughes's life and work that has been hitherto little appreciated or understood, can find more details of *The Catch* here, and pick it up in any good bookshop in the UK as of today.

Online Event - *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes*, 25th April 2022

March 25, 2022

The Ted Hughes Society is delighted to announce that our next online event for members will be a reading and discussion of *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* by Mark Wormald, the Chair of the Ted Hughes Society. The event takes place at 18.30 on Monday 25th April 2022, ahead of the book's publication by Bloomsbury on 28th April 2022.

The event will be introduced and moderated by Katharine Robinson, and will include contributions and responses from Aoine Landweer-Cooke, Malcolm Guite, Martin Shaw and Terry Gifford. It will be open to subscribing members of the Ted Hughes Society only.

The Catch tells the story of Ted Hughes's journey, as a fisherman, poet and father, into and beyond the collection *River* (1983), and chronicles Mark's own journeys, fishing in Ted's footsteps, his fishing diaries in mind, into the poems of *River* and other deep waters.

The reading and discussion is likely to concentrate on a few of these poems, so an advance reading of them may be useful: 'Strangers', 'Go Fishing', 'The Kingfisher', 'A Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan' and 'That Morning.'

The event is free of charge for Society members, and to register to attend please visit the Eventbrite page.

Opening of the Barrie Cooke Archive, Pembroke College, Cambridge
February 28, 2022

Last week Pembroke College, Cambridge made the exciting announcement that the Barrie Cooke Archive - a collection of papers and artwork related to the artist Barrie Cooke and his close friends Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, is now open to researchers.

Barrie Cooke in 2012. Photo by Mark Wormald.

Mark Wormald, Fellow of Pembroke College and Chair of the Ted Hughes Society wrote:

Pembroke College is delighted to announce the opening today of the internationally significant literary archive of the British-born expressionist artist Barrie Cooke (1931-2014), fisherman and friend of poets, and an associated collection of 150 images he made in response to their work. Cooke moved to Ireland in 1954, and the archive represents an extraordinary record of creative collaboration across geographical borders as well as between visual and literary art.

The full catalogue of the Barrie Cooke Archive can now be accessed online.

For more information on the discovery of the archive and its acquisition see this article in the Guardian.

The Barrie Cooke Archive will undoubtedly have a great effect on the study of the work of Ted Hughes, and one which will no doubt unfold over several years. The Society will be excited to see what researchers find in this treasure trove.

Dame Marina Warner to give Keynote Lecture at International Ted Hughes Conference
- Extended Call for Papers

January 14, 2022

The Ted Hughes Society are delighted to announce that our patron, Dame Marina Warner will be giving the keynote lecture at the forthcoming 'Conversation with the World', 9th International Ted Hughes Conference at the University of Huddersfield, 7th-9th September 2022.

Marina Warner, eminent novelist, mythographer and memoirist, wrote the foreword to the recent anniversary edition of Hughes's *Crow*, and spoke at the Society's Ted Hughes's *Crow* at 50 event in 2021.

For those still considering submitting a proposal to speak at 'Conversation with the World', we are also happy to announce an extension to the deadline of the conference's

call for papers. The new deadline for submission is 31st January 2022. For more details and the full call for papers, please visit the conference website.

'Mayday on Holderness': A Collaborative Close Reading led by Steve Ely
December 23, 2021

On Thursday January 27th 2022, renowned poet and Ted Hughes scholar Steve Ely will lead an online, collaborative close reading of Hughes's poem 'Mayday on Holderness'.

Steve describes the event:

In a letter to Keith Sagar (16th May, 1974), Hughes's sister Olwyn passed on his description of 'Mayday on Holderness' as:

the introductory poem to what was to be a series, and which included the better poems in LUPERCAL. The whole thing was to be a celebration of the serpentine spirit of the hungry erg [sic]. That serpentine course threads them all together (PC 33).

However we read 'erg' – urge? – the 'serpentine course' is, of course, the digestive system: in a letter to Leonard Baskin in July 1959, Hughes describes 'the general drift of the [Lupercal] poems' as "Man as an elaborately perfected intestine, or upright weasel" (LTH 147). At around the same time Hughes wrote to Olwyn explaining that Lupercal expresses 'an entire vision of life' arranged around 'the notion of God as the devourer – as the mouth & gut', and asserts that 'mother-love' (associated with the sexual urge through the fertility rite of the Roman Lupercalia) is the only 'defence' against the 'natural appetite of everything living to devour everything else' (LTH 148).

The dominant theme of Lupercal is thus the struggle of vitality against death – or, as Leonard Scijag puts it, between 'eros and thanatos', the two principles existing in an explosive, symbiotic, endlessly creative balance.[i] 'Mayday on Holderness' is a manifesto-like expression of this essentially Heraclitean or Epicurean (Lucretian) worldview – a worldview that would inform Hughes's work throughout his career. It is this that makes 'Mayday on Holderness' such an important poem in his oeuvre; indeed, there is a sense in which the poem provides an 'embryonic template' of his later work in the same way that T.S. Eliot's early poem 'The Death of Saint Narcissus' (according to Hughes in 'A Dancer to God') did to Eliot's later work.[ii]

Steve will open the session with an introductory talk of around fifteen minutes before leading a line-by-line collaborative close reading of the poem in which all present are

invited to contribute. Society members who wish to take part should register via Eventbrite by 20 January, when an annotated copy of the poem and a handout will be distributed.

[i] Leonard M. Scijag, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986). p.75.

[ii] Gillian Groszewski, 'A Dancer to God', <http://thetedsociety.org/dancertogod>

'Conversation with the World': the 9th International Ted Hughes Conference - A Call for Papers

November 5, 2021

The Ted Hughes Network have issued a call for papers for the 9th International Ted Hughes Conference, entitled 'Conversation with the World' and hosted at the University of Huddersfield, 7-9th September 2022.

Engaging the 15th anniversary of the publication of Christopher Reid's landmark *Letters of Ted Hughes* volume, the conference calls for papers considering the full range of Hughes's poetic and epistolary 'conversation with the world'. The deadline for submission of proposed papers and panels is 17th January 2021.

More details of the conference, including the full CFP can be found on the event's website.

Cave Birds - an online discussion with Neil Roberts and Kate Robinson

October 15, 2021

Untitled.png

Cave Birds is the least well known and understood of Hughes's major collections. This is partly because some of the poems are difficult, but the difficulty is increased by the fact that it has never been republished with the Leonard Baskin drawings that are an integral part of the work. Words and images are more closely connected than in any other book by Hughes. It doesn't help that Hughes himself seems not to have liked Cave Birds.

Neil Roberts and Kate Robinson disagree with Hughes and will be leading a discussion which they hope will enhance understanding and appreciation of this neglected masterpiece. Neil will be exploring the way the sequence developed in response to Baskin's drawings. Kate will discuss the collection's debts to early Welsh literature. These Welsh underpinnings provide a window into the book's narrative and into Hughes's evolving syncretism in this 'Alchemical Cave Drama'.

The event takes place online: Wednesday 3 November, 18.00-19.30 GMT, to register please follow the link below.

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/cave-birds-a-discussion-with-neil-roberts-and-katherine-robinson-tickets-183749278037?utm-campaign=social&utm-content=attendeeshare&utm-medium=discovery&utm-term=listing&utm-source=cp&aff=escb>

Online Book Launch - Carrie Smith and James Underwood

October 12, 2021

Ted Hughes Society members Carrie Smith and James Underwood will be holding an online launch of their new books on Monday, October 25th from 6:00pm-7:00pm.

414zX79YK2S.jpg

315HoUZhevS._SX331_BO1,204,203,200_.jpg

Carrie's *The Page Is Printed* is a study of Ted Hughes's composition methods, which includes a consideration of the physical circumstances - the places, paper, ink, number and variety of drafts - and also the 'intellectual and creative environments' in which the poems were made.

James has recently published *Early Larkin*, a study of the early career of a poet who Ted Hughes held in a warm personal regard, which was not always reciprocated. Of particular interest is James's investigation of the schoolgirl stories of Brunette Coleman, a pseudonym of Larkin's, and how writing these books encouraged Larkin's 'interest in everything outside himself' and ultimately helped the poet discover his distinctive voice.

If you'd like to attend, please click on this link:

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/hughes-and-larkin-book-launches-registration-181946796767>

Ted Hughes and the Theatre: A British Library Event

August 23, 2021

15-sep-Ted Hughes.jpeg

The British Library have announced an online event which will be of interest to all Society members and readers of *Hughes: Ted Hughes and the Theatre* takes place at 19.30 on Wednesday 15th September 2021.

The event brings together Ted Hughes Society Patron Melvyn Bragg, and the award-winning theatre and opera directors Tim Supple, Jonathan Kent and David Thacker for a discussion of Hughes's work in the theatre and, most fascinatingly, a conversation around Kent, Supple, and Thacker's collaborations with Hughes.

The event costs £5.00 and more information and registration can be found on the BL's event page.

Older Posts →

Copyright The Ted Hughes Society ©2021. All rights reserved

<https://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/>

2,869 captures

21 Dec 1996 - 07 Oct 2025

Apr MAY Jun

13

2024 2025 2026

About this capture

Principia Cybernetica Web

Welcome to Principia Cybernetica Web

Principia Cybernetica tries to tackle age-old philosophical questions with the help of the most recent cybernetic theories and technologies.

This is the website of the Principia Cybernetica Project (PCP), an international organization. The Project aims to develop a complete philosophy or "world-view", based on the principles of evolutionary cybernetics, and supported by collaborative computer technologies. To get started, there is an introduction with background and motivation, and an overview, summarizing the project as a whole.

Main subjects

Theory

our theoretical results, including epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, concepts, principles, memetics, and the history and future of evolution.

Organization

details the people, conferences, publications, ways of participating, newsletter and the mailing lists part of PCP.

R&D;

our algorithms, experiments and applications to develop distributed, self-organizing, knowledge networks, inspired by the "Global Brain" metaphor

Reference

background material collected by us, including an electronic library with free books, a web dictionary, related websites, and info about cybernetics and systems theory, such as bibliographies, associations, and journals.

Navigation

tools to help you to quickly find your way around our over two thousand pages, such as the Recent Changes, Search, Table of Contents, and Index, plus general information about this website and how to use it.

Other Info

this server also hosts some pages that are not part of PCP: the Association for the Foundations of Science, Language and Cognition (AFOS), and Belgium: Overview

Copyright© 2002 Principia Cybernetica - Referencing this page

Author

Editors ,,

Date

31 okt 2002 (modified)

Jul 8, 1993 (created)

Up

Prev. Next

Down

Introduction to Principia Cybernetica

Metasystem Transition Theory

Project Organization

PCP Research on Intelligent Webs

Navigation in PCP Web

Reference material

Discussion

Abstract Urbanism(tm), Comment by Tore Wallin

Comment about the project, Comment by Gustavo Seijo

Where are we ?, Correction by Michael Grudzinski

My book about law, systems and cibernetics, Comment by ernesto grun

The First Book of System Design, Illustration by Barry Kort

Challenge the Philosophy, Comment by Anne Johnson

Congratulations, Comment by Irene Paritsis

Is the project still alive?, Comment by Alex Kouznetsov

great site, but, Comment by eric hinton

Evolution still speed-up, Comment by Mike Soukharev

A few questions..., Comment by Le Roux Ronan

The Random Feature, Comment by Ben Swihart

Jaron Lanier: The ideology of cybernetic totalist intellectuals, Comment by Miguel Marcos

GB Neuron Degradation, Comment by WILLIAM MEYER

Discovery of the Universal Law, Comment by valko yotov

Notes on Infinity, Comment by Erdman West

De evolutie van de democratie, Illustration by Wiebe de Jager

There is no meaning..., Comment by No such thing

Add comment...

<https://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ETERQUES.html>

229 captures

24 Dec 1997 - 13 May 2025

May JUN Jul

16

2019 2020 2021

About this capture
Principia Cybernetica Web

Eternal Philosophical Questions

The Principia Cybernetica Project aims to develop a complete philosophical system or "world view". This philosophy tries to answer the fundamental questions, which every person reflecting about the world and his or her place in it has been asking throughout the ages. The PCP philosophy is organized as a complex network of mutually dependent concepts and principles. Therefore, the answers to these questions are scattered throughout the different "nodes" of the web.

The present document brings these different questions and answers together, in the form of a "FAQ" (Frequently Asked Questions). The answers given here are by necessity short. They barely scratch the surface of a profound and complex issue. However, where available, we have included links to other documents which discuss the problem in more detail. The present document can be seen as a roadmap, which will help philosophically interested readers to better explore the Principia Cybernetica world view.

What is?

This question defines the domain of ontology. We believe that the fundamental stuff of being, the essence of the universe, consists of elementary processes or actions, rather than matter, energy or ideas. Complex organizations, such as atoms, molecules, space and time, living beings, minds and societies emerge out of these actions through the process of evolution.

Why is there something rather than nothing?

The universe arose spontaneously, through self-organizing evolution, based on the self-evident principles of variation and natural selection. Any possible variation (for example a "quantum fluctuation of the vacuum") would be sufficient to set the self-organizing process in motion, thus generating a complex universe with its diverse components and structures.

Why is the world the way it is?

The specific state of the universe or the world in which we live is partially a historical accident, since evolution is an indeterministic process, partially the result of a lawful process of self-organization, which leads predictably to higher levels of organization

through the mechanism of metasystem transition.

Where does it all come from?

We can reconstruct in some detail the subsequent stages in the evolution of the universe, leading from the Big Bang, elementary particles, atoms and molecules to living cells, multicellular organisms, animals, people and society. Thus the history of evolution, conceived as a sequence of metasystem transitions, tells us how and in which order all the different types of phenomena we see around us have arisen.

Where do we come from?

Humans evolved out of animals that had the capacity to learn associations from the environment, by additionally acquiring the capacity to think, that is, autonomously control these associations. Human thought is rooted in the emergence of symbolic language.

Who are we?

As far as we know, humans occupy the provisionally most advanced level in the hierarchy of metasystems. Our capacity for thought distinguishes us from the animals by giving us uniquely human characteristics, such as self-consciousness, tool making, imagination, planning, play, sense of humor and esthetic feelings.

Where are we going to?

The theory of metasystem transitions helps us to extrapolate present, on-going progress into the future. Recent developments point to a new metasystem transition which will bring us to a yet higher level of complexity or consciousness, transcending individual thought. This emergent level is perhaps best described by the metaphor of the social superorganism and its global brain.

What is the purpose of it all?

Evolution does not have a purpose, in the sense of a fixed goal to which it is advancing. However, although evolution is largely unpredictable, it is not random either. Selection can be seen as having the implicit goal of maximizing survivability or fitness. This implies a preferred direction of evolution, which is in practice characterized by increasing complexity, adaptivity and intelligence.

Is there a God?

Since the mechanisms of self-organizing evolution satisfactorily explain the origin and development of the universe, and our place in it, there is no need to postulate a personal God, in the sense of a conscious entity outside of the universe which created that universe. But since in our ontology every action is assigned to, or labelled by, an agent, it is possible to define God as the agent of the Big Bang. Similarly, it is possible to consider the universe as a whole, or the process of evolution itself, as God-like, in the spirit of pantheism.

What is good and what is evil?

The evolutionary mechanism of natural selection makes an implicit distinction between

"good" or "fit" situations (those which survive in the long term), and "bad" or "unfit" ones (those which are eliminated sooner or later). Therefore, we might equate good or higher values with anything that contributes to survival and the continuation of the process of evolution, and evil with anything that destroys, kills or thwarts the development of fit systems.

What is knowledge?

This question defines the domain of epistemology. Knowledge is the existence in a cybernetic system of a model, which allows that system to make predictions, that is, to anticipate processes in its environment. Thus, the system gets control over its environment. Such a model is a personal construction, not an objective reflection of outside reality.

What is truth?

There are no absolute truths. The truth of a theory is merely its power to produce predictions that are confirmed by observations. However, different theories can produce similar predictions without one of them being right and the other wrong. "True" knowledge is the one that best survives the natural selection for predictive power.

What is consciousness?

Even the most primitive cybernetic agent must be able to sense its environment in order to reach its goals. More complex agents can integrate different sensations into a global awareness of their situation, and use subsequent experiences to learn and improve their mental functioning. Only people are moreover conscious of their own experiences, and thus able to control them. Such consciousness is an eminently subjective relation between the agent and the relevant internal and external aspects of its situation. It is not some mysterious kind of substance or fluid, and there is no intrinsically "hard" problem of consciousness.

Do we have a "free will"?

The unpredictability implied by quantum mechanics has done away with the Newtonian world view, in which all future events are predetermined. In our evolutionary worldview, there always is a choice: a variety of possibilities, some of which are retained by selection. The defining characteristic of a cybernetic agent is some degree of control over that selection. Because of their capacity for thought, people, moreover, are not only free to choose between given possibilities, but able to conceive novel possibilities and explore their consequences.

How should we act?

Effective action is based on a clear sense of goals or values, and a good model of the environment in which you try to reach these goals. By applying problem-solving methods, you can explore the possible situations in your model to find the most efficient path from your present situation to your goal. You can then try out this action plan in practice, taking into account the feedback you get in order to correct your course.

How can we be happy?

People are happy when they are "in control", that is, feel competent to satisfy their needs and reach their goals. Happiness is most common in societies which provide sufficient wealth, health care, education, personal freedom and equality. Happy people tend to be self-confident, open to experience and have good personal relations. Promoting these social and personal values should increase our overall quality of life.

Why cannot we live forever?

Evolution has predisposed us to age and die because fitness is achieved more easily by fast reproduction than by long life. Aging is the result of a variety of deterioration processes. Therefore, it is unlikely that we will achieve biological immortality in the near future, in spite of a constantly increasing life span. However, we can still aim for cybernetic immortality: survival of our mental organization, rather than our material body.

What is the meaning of life?

This question in a sense summarizes all previous questions. It is usually understood as: "What are the highest values, the Supreme Goals which I should try to achieve?". We stress that every human being must freely set those goals for himself or herself. The supreme goal which we choose derives logically from our cybernetic world view: to make a constructive contribution to the evolution of humanity, in order to maximize our long-term chances of survival (immortality). In essence, the meaning of life is to increase evolutionary fitness.

Copyright© 2000 Principia Cybernetica - Referencing this page

Author

F. Heylighen, C. Joslyn, V. Turchin,

Date

Sep 6, 2000 (modified)

Oct 24, 1997 (created)

[Home](#)

[Introduction to Principia Cybernetica](#)

[Up](#)

[Prev.](#) [Next](#)

[Down](#)

[What is the meaning of life?](#)

[Discussion](#)

[Absolute Truths DO exist, Refutation by Lion Kimbro](#)

[How does competition work?, Illustration by Joshua Pritikin](#)

[The real meaning of life, Refutation by Dumont Arnaud](#)

[Why is there something rather than nothing?, Comment by Andrey V. Lukyanov](#)

An Alternative View, Comment by Matthew Shapiro
Absolute Truth, Comment by Ramnath Subbaraman
The denial of absolute truths is self-refuting., Comment by Paul Sullins
General critique on philosophy, Comment by David Howe
Running roughshod, modernity trounces on..., Comment by L. D. Kingsley
It's all an illusion, Comment by Dominicus
God does not exist!, Comment by Dominicus
f*ing idiots, Comment by Jon Doe # 420
Nice theory we have..., Comment by Derekon
Determinism and predictability according to Dawkins, Refutation by Izabela
Wha?, Comment by Mario Bartoletti
How can we be happy?, Correction by Mirco Sanguineti
Consciousness is not just human, Refutation by C.Herger Thomann
Consciousness is not just human, Refutation by C.Herger Thomann
Do we have a "free will"?, Refutation by Patrick Nouhailler
I agree with most of it, however - - - , Correction by Aaron Wilson
The REAL meaning of life., Comment by Miranca Diuncae
The REAL meaning of life., Comment by Miranca Diuncae
The REAL meaning of life., Comment by Miranca Diuncae
dont these statements contradict eachother. , Comment by julia mccahill
Entropy's always inevitable, Comment by Stewart Thompson
The Overman has his day, Comment by Stewart Thompson
Absolute truth is not so easy to define, Comment by Caglar Irmak
Where did the world come from?, Comment by PolarBear
Unecessary 'rather', Comment by Didymos Judas Thomas
hard to dispute up to faltering faq #7, derails by faq #10, Comment by Dog Naked
Add comment...

<https://www.feedback.nildram.co.uk/richardebbs/meditation/meditationindex.htm>

130 captures

4 Oct 2001 - 12 Feb 2020

Apr MAY Oct

05

2011 2012 2013

About this capture
animated globe

title graphic

prayer wheel prayer wheel prayer wheel

A reference site for meditation techniques from across the world

ruler

Hopefully, a site for sore eyes. The aim here is to create a repository of succinct, practical meditation methods, drawing from traditions ancient, modern, and home-grown. The emphasis is on the 'doing' of it, without too much in the way of either cosmology or evangelicism!

The meditations below are presented in such a way that they can be read aloud by one person to lead one or more other people through the practise as an introduction.

ruler

CONTENTS

Basic Relaxation Meditation
Basic Breathing Meditation
Basic Movement Meditation
Zazen Meditation
Dzogchen Mindfulness Meditation
Breath, Body And Energy Meditation
Space Clearing Meditation
Group Space Clearing Meditation
The Middle Pillar Ritual
Metta Bhavana Meditation
Tonglen Meditation
Chakra Meditation
Sweat Lodge
Vision Quest

Physical Posture
Mental Attitude
Opening And Closing A Meditation

Contributions

ruler

A note from the site organiser.

My name is Richard.
I have had a long-sitting interest in meditation and meditation techniques.

I (also) work with computers.

Hence I am in a good position to be able to share what little knowledge I have gained on this subject

and

also I would very much like to make this site available to other people wishing to share some of the practises with which they are familiar (see Contributions).

Hence the site. ENJOY!

PS I am NOT a teacher. More of a collator here...

ruler

butterfly

cheers!

Home Page

<https://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu//nrms/kabb.html>

78 captures

8 Jun 2001 - 28 Feb 2021

Nov DEC Jan

17

2006 2007 2009

About this capture

Qabalah/Kabbalah

I. Profile Report

Full name of the group: Qabalah (modern "cultic" spelling, also known as Hermetic Qabalah), Kabbalah (traditional Jewish spelling), Cabala (Christian spelling). All of these spellings are merely transliterations of the word in Hebrew. Therefore, one spelling is not necessarily right over another, but each group tends to spell it differently.

Founder: Isaac the Blind (It is not known for sure that he was the original founder, but he is considered the Father of Kabbalah. Aspects of Kabbalah can be traced back to the first century A.D.)

Date of Birth and Death: c. 1160-c. 1236

Birth Place: Provence

Year of founding: Kabbalah can be traced as far back as the first century A.D. It was formed as a scholarly group sometime during Isaac the Blind's lifetime (c. 1160-1236), but the exact year is unknown.

Why and how it was founded: The first Kabbalistic ideas emerged in ancient times as an attempt by the Merkabah mystics to reach what they called the "higher throne" of G-d. Isaac the Blind was the first to name Jewish mysticism Kabbalah, and he formed a scholarly group based on the tradition.

Cult or Sect: Negative sentiments are typically implied when the concepts "cult" and "sect" are employed in popular discourse. Since the Religious Movements Homepage seeks to promote religious tolerance and appreciation of the positive benefits of pluralism and religious diversity in human cultures, we encourage the use of alternative concepts that do not carry implicit negative stereotypes. For a more detailed discussion of both scholarly and popular usage of the concepts "cult" and "sect," please visit our Conceptualizing "Cult" and "Sect" page, where you will find additional links to related issues.

Sacred or Revered Texts:
Torah

Sepher Yetzirah , or the Book of Formation (c. first century A.D.)

Bahir (12th Century)

Sepher ha Zohar, or the Book of Splendour by Moses de Leon of Spain (late 13th century)

Key of Solomon (Middle Ages) This text is considered part of the magical aspect of Qabalah which is not accepted by mainstream Kabbalists.

Beliefs:
Kabbalah:

Kabbalah means "to receive" or "to accept." It is believed that when Moses brought the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai he also brought with him oral law, or Kabbalah. People who know this secret oral tradition claim to know the true meaning of the Torah which has hidden messages. Therefore, the main principles of Kabbalah are a belief in the divinity of the Torah and that by studying the Torah you can understand the creation of the world. Kabbalists also believe that a prophet was someone "chosen by G-d as a mouth-piece." (Low, Colin. Hermetic Kabbalah. "Frequently Asked Questions."
<http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>) They saw G-d as a being not as an abstraction. Qabalah:

"It is probably accurate to say that from the Renaissance on, virtually all occult philosophers and magicians of note had a working knowledge of some aspect of Kabbalah . . ." (Low, Colin. Hermetic Kabbalah. "Frequently Asked Questions.") Groups that currently practice Qabalah are the Hermetics, the Gnostics, the Neoplatists, the Pythagoreanists, the Rosicrucianists, Tantra, the English Order of the Golden Dawn, and the French magician Eliphas Levi. Some Qabalists practice ritual magic -- "names of power, the magic circle, ritual implements, consecration, evocation of spirits, etc." (Low, Colin. Hermetic Kabbalah. "Frequently Asked Questions."

<http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>)

Cabala:

Some Christians see Cabala as a way to reveal hidden meaning in scriptures and others see it as a mechanism to be used to convert Jews to Christianity. The main Christian Cabalist leader was Giovanni Pico, Count of Mirandola. He claimed, "No science can better convince us of the divinity of Jesus Christ than magic and the Kabbalah." (Walden, Michael. Qabalistic Tarot: Table of Contents. "Introduction to Qabalah." <http://www.tcd.net/~mwalden/qbl/contents.html>)

Size: Not known

Remarks: As I said in the beliefs section, the Kabbalists of all kinds believe in hidden meanings in the Torah. Kabbalists believe that every letter of the Hebrew Aleph Beth (alphabet) has a hidden meaning. Qabalists expand that idea and give each letter a tarot key and an affiliation with a constellation. The Cabalists say that they know Jesus is the son of G-d because the Hebrew name for G-d is spelled Yod Heh Vav Heh. By adding a fifth letter, Shin, the name of Jesus in Hebrew is formed (Yod Heh Shin Vav Heh). To the Cabalists, Yod is fire, Heh is Water, Vav is air, the final Heh is Earth, and the Shin is spirit. (Walden, Michael. Qabalistic Tarot: Table of Contents. "Introduction to Qabalah." <http://www.tcd.net/~mwalden/qbl/contents.html>)

II. Links Qabalah/Kabbalah Web Sites

Colin's Hermetic Kabbalah Page

In Colin Low's words, "This site is dedicated to publishing modern material on Kabbalah and related topics." This page includes articles, information, and links. Colin Low has also included a helpful Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page with background information on Kabbalah. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>

Virtual Tree of Life

This page is a "reference tool for the Qabalah as used in Western Occultism." This page provides useful techniques for learning about Qabalah. It also includes a bibliography and other links. (unofficial home page)

<http://sephiroth.org/vtol/>

The Hermits Page

"This site is dedicated to the introduction of Qabalah, as a component of what is commonly called, the 'Ancient Mysteries.'" It includes links to Project Mind, Gateway to Qabalah, and the Alchemy Home Page. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.webcom.com/hermit/welcome.html>

The Gateway to Qabalah

[Size = 3K] This is Doug Evans' page of information on Jewish mysticism and Qabalah. It includes resources such as books, essays, and other Web sites. This page has a unique chart on the Qabalistic relationships of the Aleph Beth. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.webcom.com/~hermit/qabalah/html>

Qabalah

Christopher Ward says about his site, "This page is a collection of graphics, articles, and pointers which deal with that part of the Western Mystery Tradition known as Qabalah." It includes links, books, and information on Qabalah. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.think.com/users/cward/WWW/qabalah.html>

Qabalistic Tarot

Michael Walden's page on basic Qabalah, patterns of the Sephiroth, the tree of life, and practical work with the tarot. This is an in-depth information source the origins, teachings, and practice of Qabalah. The page also includes recommended readings. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.tcd.net/~mwalden/qbl/contents.html>

The New Age Web Works -- Qabalah

Del Enterprise's Inc.'s page on Qabalah. It includes links, information on Qabalah, and information on the New Age Web Works. (author-unknown)

<http://www.newageinfo.com/res/qabalah.htm>

The New Living Qabalah

Exerpts and information from Will Parfitt's book The New Living Qabalah. The book is based on, "Bringing the Qabalah alive [and] making it accessible and relevent to the modern world." (author-unknown)

<http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/town.square/ae608/qabbbooks.html>

Isis Unveiled

This site encompasses all occult knowledge. You will not only find information and links to Qabalah, but also to Paganism, Tarot, and other Esoterica. (author-unknown)

<http://malkuth.sephirah.org/occult.html>

Anders Magick Page

Anders Sandberg's page on magick and mysticism. This page includes information on Qabalah and other Hermetic groups. This page also includes articles and links.

(author-unknown)
<http://www.nada.kth.se/~nv91-asa/magick.html>

III. Selected References on Kabbalah Books

Blumenthal, David R., 1978.
Understanding Jewish Mysticism. New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc.

Crowley, Aleister, 1986.
777 and other Qabalistic Writings of Aleister Crowley: Including Gematria and Sepher Sephiroth with an introduction by Israel Regardie. York Beach, ME: S. Wesier.

Encausse, Gerard Anaclet Vincent (Papus), 1977.
The Qabalah: Secret Tradition of the West. Wellingborough: Thorsons.

Fine, Lawrence, ed., 1995.
Essential Papers on Kabbalah. New York: New York University Press.

Gutwirth, Israel, 1987.
The Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism. New York: Philosophical Library.

Hoffman, Edward, 1995.
Opening the Inner Gates: New Paths in Kabbalah and Psychology. Boston: Shambhala.

Hoffman, Edward, 1981.
The Way of Splendor: Jewish Mysticism and Modern Psychology. Boulder, CO: Shambhala.

Levi, Eliphas, 1973.
The Book of Splendours. Wellingborough: Aquarian Press.

Levi, Eliphas, 1974.
The Mysteries of the Qabalah. New York: S. Weiser.
Luzzatto, Rabbi Moses C. Translated by the Research Center of Kabbalah, 1970.
General Principles of the Kabbalah. New York: The Press of the Research Centre of Kabbalah.

Matt, Daniel C., 1995.
The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Scholem, Gershom, 1987.
Origins of the Kabbalah. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Sperling, Harry, and Maurice Simon (translators), 1970.
The Zohar. New York: The Soncino Press.

Waite, Arthur Edward, 1902.
The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabbalah. London: The Theosophical Publishing Society.

Newspaper Articles

Feldman, Ron H, February 25, 1996.

"A Gateway to Jewish Mysticism." San Francisco Chronicle. REV, 8:1.

Kosman, Joshua, October 6, 1991.

"Stewart Wallace: Kabbalah." San Francisco Chronicle. DAT, 42:4.

Silk, Mark, May 27, 1995.

"Unraveling Mysteries of the Hebrew Bible." Atlanta Journal Constitution. F, 6:4.

Magazine and Journal Articles

Alter, Robert, 1990.

"Jewish Mysticism." Commentary. 89:13-15.

Baigell, Matthew, 1994. (Art)

"Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take." American Art. 8(2):32-43.

Halbertal, Moshe, 1990.

"Varieties of Mysticism." The New Republic. 202:34-9.

Longstaff, S.A., 1987. (Sociology)

"Daniel Bell and Political Reconciliation." Queen's Quarterly. 94, 3, autumn, 660-665.

Scholem, Gershom, Jean Bollack, and Pierre Bordieu, 1980. (Sociology)

"The Jewish Identity." Actes-de-la-recherche-en-sciences-sociales. 35, November, 3-19.

V. Commentary

Abstract

This brief commentary will focus on the general beliefs of Kabbalah/Qabalah. It will also include a bit of history on the origins of most Kabbalistic beliefs. At the end of the commentary, you will find a few quotes by David Wolfe-Blank. These "Hassidic Sparks" are meant to summarize many of the fundamental Kabbalistic beliefs.

Outline

Introductory explanation of Kabbalah versus Qabalah

Origins

Kabbalah

Qabalah

"Hassidic Sparks" by David Wolf-Blank

Body

Note: for more detail on internal documentation see sections III and IV.

"No one with the slightest interest in Kabbalah can fail to notice that there are many alternative spellings of the word, the two most common being Kabbalah and Qabalah . . . The reason for this is that some letters in the Hebrew alphabet have more than one representation in the English alphabet, and the same Hebrew letter can be written either as K or Q (or sometimes even C) . . . There has been a tendency for non- Jewish books on Kabbalah published this century to use the spelling 'Qabalah.' Jewish publications are relatively uniform in preferring the spelling 'Kabbalah'" (Low, Colin. Colin's Hermetic Kabbalah Page: <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>).

Kabbalah began in the first century A.D. when Isaac the Blind formed a scholarly group based on mystical traditions. Like the Jewish religion as a whole, Kabbalah has thrived throughout the ages. Even today, Kabbalah interests people of all ages, but especially the younger generation. "The study of mysticism has a certain attraction for students in the last quarter of the twentieth century" (Blumenthal, xv). The Christians and the Muslims adopted aspects of Kabbalah into their mysticism, and more recently, a cultic group formed with their basic tenets centered around Kabbalistic belief.

In a complex modern society, people are seeking their inner-self. They desire a self-awareness, a spiritual consciousness. Kabbalists realize that much of the world is unexplainable to humans who exist in one level of consciousness. Therefore, they seek to enter other levels of spirituality by detailed study of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Kabbalists believe the answers to all human perplexities can be found in this most sacred work, but the answers are hidden within a complex network of codes and symbols. Not only is the Torah all- encompassing, it is also dynamic, meaning God continues to create.

The first person to record the mysteries of the Torah was Rabbi Shimon who lived during Rome's rule over Israel. Rabbi Shimon taught the Torah despite the Roman edict banning all practice of Judaism. When the Romans sentenced Rabbi Shimon to death, he fled to a cave with his son, Rabbi El'azar. They hid in the cave for thirteen years. During this time, Rabbi Shimon developed spiritually by drawing "on deep levels of memory and vision stored in his unconsciousness from years of study" (Luzzatto, xxix). Rabbi Shimon created the Zohar, the Book of Splendor, which remains the most important book of Kabbalah.

In sixteenth century Safed, a town in the mountainous Upper Galilee region of Israel, Rabbi Moses Cordovero began to study Kabbalah. He developed a clear understanding of the main Kabbalistic teachings, and he, along with his student Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari), composed volumes of writings on their mystical interpretations. Rabbis Shimon,

Cordovero, and Luria along with Isaac the Blind were the primary founders of Jewish mysticism, and their ideas remain the basis for most Kabbalistic interpretation.

An important idea Kabbalists teach is that there are ten Sephirot, emanations, "which the Creator issued to serve as channels through which His bounty might be transmitted to man" (Luzzatto, 3). These ten stages are Keter (crown) also called Da'at (knowledge), Hokmah (wisdom), Binah (intelligence), Hesed (mercy), Geburah (power), Tif'eret (beauty), Nezah (triumph), Hod (glory), Yesod (foundation), and Malkut (kingdom). These Sephirot can be imagined in the form of a human. For example, Keter is the head, Hokmah and Binah are the two halves of the brain, Hesed and Geburah are the hands, and the others make up the rest of the body. Both good and bad actions find root in the vessels, but all God's actions are good. Therefore, when everyone on earth discovers spiritual unity with God, people will realize that all God's actions are good.

For Kabbalists their ultimate aspiration is to reach a oneness with God. Every person should strive to attain this spiritual oneness by ascending from one world to another. The bottom world is the world of action, Assiah; the second level is the world of formation, Jetzirah; the third world is the world of creation, Briah; the fourth and highest world is the world of emanation, Atziluth. At the final level, a person, usually through extensive meditation and a departure from the body, arrives in a state of total knowledge of the universe. All creation evolves around this goal.

Light plays an important role in the spiritual life of a Kabbalist. They refer to the Impression of Light as the source of humanity, the lower beings, who exist in the fallible state. God hovers above the fallible lower beings as the Infinite Encircling Light. He interacts with the fallible beings through a Line of Light in an attempt to help them reach perfection. The Line of Light is God's way of instilling perfection and abolishing all imperfection.

Qabalah is the "cultic" branch of Kabbalah. To the Qabalists, man exists parallel to the universe as a whole. Man's organs are like elements of the Universe. For example, blood maintains human life as it flows, much like the Universe is maintained by the "flow" of sunlight. Man's "nervous fluid" also governs his actions, but this fluid is entirely separate from the blood. There is only one connection between the nerve cell and the nerve receptor. Similarly, there is only one connection between God and man, a fluid that God emanates, the spirit of the Universe. Occultists call this spirit Universal Magnetism, but the Qabalists call it Aour. Therefore, both man and the Universe have the same three components: a body (physical), a life (blood and light), and a will (nervous fluid and Aour), but ". . . like Man, the Universe is subject to periodic involution and ultimately it will be reintegrated in its origin: God" (Encausse, 176).

Another aspect of Qabalah is the importance of numbers. Certain numbers found in the Torah can be analyzed to show their significance. For example, in the prophecy of Ezekiel, the first sentence reads, "And it came to pass in the thirtieth year of the fourth month." J. Charrot explains, " $3 \times 10 = 30$ decans, and $30 \times 12 = 360$ and $3 \times 24 = 72$ which is the ternary divided by four, giving 18. 30 decans in the cycle of 12, 12×30 , give 360

divisions of the church year in the cycle of 12 months pertaining to the 4 seasons of a civilization. By adding a 0 we arrived at 3600, 6 times the week of Moses; it is to be understood then that 1800 is only half a double civilization" (Levi, 25). Complicated explanations of individual passages from the sacred texts characterize the essence of mystical Qabalah.

Qabalists also believe that man is made of three elements: Nephesh, Neshamah, and Ruah. Nephesh is the lowest element and it is the "determining principle which accounts for the appearance of the material form" (Encausse, 171). The Neshamah is the highest element. It is the divine spark and "the spirit of the occultists" (Encausse, 171). The Ruah, the life or the soul, is the uniting force between the other two elements.

In the words of Everett Gendler, "Mysticism is an intense experience of direct connection with life's Source and Surrounding Purpose." For believers of both Qabalah and Kabbalah, mysticism brings them an understanding of the world around them. As they seek answers to the complexities of the universe, they ultimately find themselves.

--"Hassidic Sparks"--
by David Wolfe-Blank

"God alone has real existence and all else is illusion. The Divine is everywhere. There is none beside the Divine means that there is nothing beside the Divine."

"Human fulfillment depends on the overcoming of separations and balancing disharmonious relationships on every level of experience."

"Every individual should be regarded as potentially good as each has a 'holy spark.' The goodness within the other should be encouraged. No one is ultimately evil."

"One never knows what one's full resources are until one attempts the deed asked. Only then does one discover the limits of one's capacities."

"Activities like prayer, song, and dance, in which one opens one's self directly and wholeheartedly are powerful means to personal unification."

"Despair is the greatest evil."

Prepared by Erin Ghelber

Soc 257: New Religious Movements

Spring Term, 1996

Last Modified: 07/16/01

<https://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/kabb.html>

78 captures

8 Jun 2001 - 28 Feb 2021

Nov DEC Jan

17

2006 2007 2009

About this capture

Qabalah/Kabbalah

I. Profile Report

Full name of the group: Qabalah (modern "cultic" spelling, also known as Hermetic Qabalah), Kabbalah (traditional Jewish spelling), Cabala (Christian spelling). All of these spellings are merely transliterations of the word in Hebrew. Therefore, one spelling is not necessarily right over another, but each group tends to spell it differently.

Founder: Isaac the Blind (It is not known for sure that he was the original founder, but he is considered the Father of Kabbalah. Aspects of Kabbalah can be traced back to the first century A.D.)

Date of Birth and Death: c. 1160-c. 1236

Birth Place: Provence

Year of founding: Kabbalah can be traced as far back as the first century A.D. It was formed as a scholarly group sometime during Isaac the Blind's lifetime (c. 1160-1236), but the exact year is unknown.

Why and how it was founded: The first Kabbalistic ideas emerged in ancient times as an attempt by the Merkabah mystics to reach what they called the "higher throne" of G-d. Isaac the Blind was the first to name Jewish mysticism Kabbalah, and he formed a scholarly group based on the tradition.

Cult or Sect: Negative sentiments are typically implied when the concepts "cult" and "sect" are employed in popular discourse. Since the Religious Movements Homepage seeks to promote religious tolerance and appreciation of the positive benefits of pluralism and religious diversity in human cultures, we encourage the use of alternative concepts that do not carry implicit negative stereotypes. For a more detailed discussion of both scholarly and popular usage of the concepts "cult" and "sect," please visit our Conceptualizing "Cult" and "Sect" page, where you will find additional links to related issues.

Sacred or Revered Texts:

Torah

Sepher Yetzirah , or the Book of Formation (c. first century A.D.)

Bahir (12th Century)

Sepher ha Zohar, or the Book of Splendour by Moses de Leon of Spain (late 13th

century)

Key of Solomon (Middle Ages) This text is considered part of the magical aspect of Qabalah which is not accepted by mainstream Kabbalists.

Beliefs:

Kabbalah:

Kabbalah means "to receive" or "to accept." It is believed that when Moses brought the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai he also brought with him oral law, or Kabbalah. People who know this secret oral tradition claim to know the true meaning of the Torah which has hidden messages. Therefore, the main principles of Kabbalah are a belief in the divinity of the Torah and that by studying the Torah you can understand the creation of the world. Kabbalists also believe that a prophet was someone "chosen by G-d as a mouth-piece." (Low, Colin. Hermetic Kabbalah. "Frequently Asked Questions."

<http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>) They saw G-d as a being not as an abstraction. Qabalah:

"It is probably accurate to say that from the Renaissance on, virtually all occult philosophers and magicians of note had a working knowledge of some aspect of Kabbalah . . ." (Low, Colin. Hermetic Kabbalah. "Frequently Asked Questions.") Groups that currently practice Qabalah are the Hermetics, the Gnostics, the Neoplatists, the Pythagoreanists, the Rosicrucianists, Tantra, the English Order of the Golden Dawn, and the French magician Eliphas Levi. Some Qabalists practice ritual magic -- "names of power, the magic circle, ritual implements, consecration, evocation of spirits, etc."

(Low, Colin. Hermetic Kabbalah. "Frequently Asked Questions."

<http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>)

Cabala:

Some Christians see Cabala as a way to reveal hidden meaning in scriptures and others see it as a mechanism to be used to convert Jews to Christianity. The main Christian Cabalist leader was Giovanni Pico, Count of Mirandola. He claimed, "No science can better convince us of the divinity of Jesus Christ than magic and the Kabbalah." (Walden, Michael. Qabalistic Tarot: Table of Contents. "Introduction to Qabalah." <http://www.tcd.net/~mwalden/qbl/contents.html>)

Size: Not known

Remarks: As I said in the beliefs section, the Kabbalists of all kinds believe in hidden meanings in the Torah. Kabbalists believe that every letter of the Hebrew Aleph Beth (alphabet) has a hidden meaning. Qabalists expand that idea and give each letter a tarot key and an affiliation with a constellation. The Cabalists say that they know Jesus is the son of G-d because the Hebrew name for G-d is spelled Yod Heh Vav Heh. By

adding a fifth letter, Shin, the name of Jesus in Hebrew is formed (Yod Heh Shin Vav Heh). To the Cabalists, Yod is fire, Heh is Water, Vav is air, the final Heh is Earth, and the Shin is spirit. (Walden, Michael. Qabalistic Tarot: Table of Contents. "Introduction to Qabalah." <http://www.tcd.net/~mwalden/qbl/contents.html>)

II. Links Qabalah/Kabbalah Web Sites

Colin's Hermetic Kabbalah Page

In Colin Low's words, "This site is dedicated to publishing modern material on Kabbalah and related topics." This page includes articles, information, and links. Colin Low has also included a helpful Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page with background information on Kabbalah. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>

Virtual Tree of Life

This page is a "reference tool for the Qabalah as used in Western Occultism." This page provides useful techniques for learning about Qabalah. It also includes a bibliography and other links. (unofficial home page)

<http://sephiroth.org/vtol/>

The Hermits Page

"This site is dedicated to the introduction of Qabalah, as a component of what is commonly called, the 'Ancient Mysteries.'" It includes links to Project Mind, Gateway to Qabalah, and the Alchemy Home Page. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.webcom.com/hermit/welcome.html>

The Gateway to Qabalah

[Size = 3K] This is Doug Evans' page of information on Jewish mysticism and Qabalah. It includes resources such as books, essays, and other Web sites. This page has a unique chart on the Qabalistic relationships of the Aleph Beth. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.webcom.com/~hermit/qabalah/html>

Qabalah

Christopher Ward says about his site, "This page is a collection of graphics, articles, and pointers which deal with that part of the Western Mystery Tradition known as Qabalah." It includes links, books, and information on Qabalah. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.think.com/users/cward/WWW/qabalah.html>

Qabalistic Tarot

Michael Walden's page on basic Qabalah, patterns of the Sephiroth, the tree of life, and practical work with the tarot. This is an in-depth information source the origins, teachings, and practice of Qabalah. The page also includes recommended readings. (unofficial home page)

<http://www.tcd.net/~mwalden/qbl/contents.html>

The New Age Web Works -- Qabalah

Del Enterprise's Inc.'s page on Qabalah. It includes links, information on Qabalah, and information on the New Age Web Works. (author-unknown)
<http://www.newageinfo.com/res/qabalah.htm>

The New Living Qabalah

Exerpts and information from Will Parfitt's book The New Living Qabalah. The book is based on, "Bringing the Qabalah alive [and] making it accessible and relevent to the modern world." (author-unknown)
<http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town.square/ae608/qabbbooks.html>

Isis Unveiled

This site encompasses all occult knowledge. You will not only find information and links to Qabalah, but also to Paganism, Tarot, and other Esoterica. (author-unknown)
<http://malkuth.sephirah.org/occult.html>

Anders Magick Page

Anders Sandberg's page on magick and mysticism. This page includes information on Qabalah and other Hermetic groups. This page also includes articles and links. (author-unknown)
<http://www.nada.kth.se/~nv91-asa/magick.html>

III. Selected References on Kabbalah Books

Blumenthal, David R., 1978.
Understanding Jewish Mysticism. New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc.

Crowley, Aleister, 1986.
777 and other Qabalistic Writings of Aleister Crowley: Including Gematria and Sepher Sephiroth with an introduction by Israel Regardie. York Beach, ME: S. Wesier.

Encausse, Gerard Anaclet Vincent (Papus), 1977.
The Qabalah: Secret Tradition of the West. Wellingborough: Thorsons.

Fine, Lawrence, ed., 1995.
Essential Papers on Kabbalah. New York: New York University Press.

Gutwirth, Israel, 1987.
The Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism. New York: Philosophical Library.

Hoffman, Edward, 1995.
Opening the Inner Gates: New Paths in Kabbalah and Psychology. Boston: Shambhala.

Hoffman, Edward, 1981.

The Way of Splendor: Jewish Mysticism and Modern Psychology. Boulder, CO: Shambhala.

Levi, Eliphas, 1973.

The Book of Splendours. Wellingborough: Aquarian Press.

Levi, Eliphas, 1974.

The Mysteries of the Qabalah. New York: S. Weiser.

Luzzatto, Rabbi Moses C. Translated by the Research Center of Kabbalah, 1970.

General Principles of the Kabbalah. New York: The Press of the Research Centre of Kabbalah.

Matt, Daniel C., 1995.

The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Scholem, Gershom, 1987.

Origins of the Kabbalah. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Sperling, Harry, and Maurice Simon (translators), 1970.

The Zohar. New York: The Soncino Press.

Waite, Arthur Edward, 1902.

The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabbalah. London: The Theosophical Publishing Society.

Newspaper Articles

Feldman, Ron H, February 25, 1996.

"A Gateway to Jewish Mysticism." San Francisco Chronicle. REV, 8:1.

Kosman, Joshua, October 6, 1991.

"Stewart Wallace: Kabbalah." San Francisco Chronicle. DAT, 42:4.

Silk, Mark, May 27, 1995.

"Unraveling Mysteries of the Hebrew Bible." Atlanta Journal Constitution. F, 6:4.

Magazine and Journal Articles

Alter, Robert, 1990.

"Jewish Mysticism." Commentary. 89:13-15.

Baigell, Matthew, 1994. (Art)

"Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take." American Art. 8(2):32-43.

Halbertal, Moshe, 1990.

"Varieties of Mysticism." The New Republic. 202:34-9.

Longstaff, S.A., 1987. (Sociology)

"Daniel Bell and Political Reconciliation." *Queen's Quarterly*. 94, 3, autumn, 660-665.

Scholem, Gershom, Jean Bollack, and Pierre Bordieu, 1980. (Sociology)

"The Jewish Identity." *Actes-de-la-recherche-en-sciences-sociales*. 35, November, 3-19.

V. Commentary

Abstract

This brief commentary will focus on the general beliefs of Kabbalah/Qabalah. It will also include a bit of history on the origins of most Kabbalistic beliefs. At the end of the commentary, you will find a few quotes by David Wolfe-Blank. These "Hassidic Sparks" are meant to summarize many of the fundamental Kabbalistic beliefs.

Outline

Introductory explanation of Kabbalah versus Qabalah

Origins

Kabbalah

Qabalah

"Hassidic Sparks" by David Wolf-Blank

Body

Note: for more detail on internal documentation see sections III and IV.

"No one with the slightest interest in Kabbalah can fail to notice that there are many alternative spellings of the word, the two most common being Kabbalah and Qabalah . . . The reason for this is that some letters in the Hebrew alphabet have more than one representation in the English alphabet, and the same Hebrew letter can be written either as K or Q (or sometimes even C) . . . There has been a tendency for non- Jewish books on Kabbalah published this century to use the spelling 'Qabalah.' Jewish publications are relatively uniform in preferring the spelling 'Kabbalah'" (Low, Colin. *Colin's Hermetic Kabbalah Page*: <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>).

Kabbalah began in the first century A.D. when Isaac the Blind formed a scholarly group based on mystical traditions. Like the Jewish religion as a whole, Kabbalah has thrived throughout the ages. Even today, Kabbalah interests people of all ages, but especially the younger generation. "The study of mysticism has a certain attraction for students in the last quarter of the twentieth century" (Blumenthal, xv). The Christians and the Muslims adopted aspects of Kabbalah into their mysticism, and more recently, a cultic group formed with their basic tenets centered around Kabbalistic belief.

In a complex modern society, people are seeking their inner-self. They desire a self-awareness, a spiritual consciousness. Kabbalists realize that much of the world is unexplainable to humans who exist in one level of consciousness. Therefore, they seek to enter other levels of spirituality by detailed study of the Torah, the Five Books of

Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Kabbalists believe the answers to all human perplexities can be found in this most sacred work, but the answers are hidden within a complex network of codes and symbols. Not only is the Torah all-encompassing, it is also dynamic, meaning God continues to create.

The first person to record the mysteries of the Torah was Rabbi Shimon who lived during Rome's rule over Israel. Rabbi Shimon taught the Torah despite the Roman edict banning all practice of Judaism. When the Romans sentenced Rabbi Shimon to death, he fled to a cave with his son, Rabbi El'azar. They hid in the cave for thirteen years. During this time, Rabbi Shimon developed spiritually by drawing "on deep levels of memory and vision stored in his unconsciousness from years of study" (Luzzatto, xxix). Rabbi Shimon created the Zohar, the Book of Splendor, which remains the most important book of Kabbalah.

In sixteenth century Safed, a town in the mountainous Upper Galilee region of Israel, Rabbi Moses Cordovero began to study Kabbalah. He developed a clear understanding of the main Kabbalistic teachings, and he, along with his student Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari), composed volumes of writings on their mystical interpretations. Rabbis Shimon, Cordovero, and Luria along with Isaac the Blind were the primary founders of Jewish mysticism, and their ideas remain the basis for most Kabbalistic interpretation.

An important idea Kabbalists teach is that there are ten Sephirot, emanations, "which the Creator issued to serve as channels through which His bounty might be transmitted to man" (Luzzatto, 3). These ten stages are Keter (crown) also called Da'at (knowledge), Hokmah (wisdom), Binah (intelligence), Hesed (mercy), Geburah (power), Tiferet (beauty), Nezah (triumph), Hod (glory), Yesod (foundation), and Malkut (kingdom). These Sephirot can be imagined in the form of a human. For example, Keter is the head, Hokmah and Binah are the two halves of the brain, Hesed and Geburah are the hands, and the others make up the rest of the body. Both good and bad actions find root in the vessels, but all God's actions are good. Therefore, when everyone on earth discovers spiritual unity with God, people will realize that all God's actions are good.

For Kabbalists their ultimate aspiration is to reach a oneness with God. Every person should strive to attain this spiritual oneness by ascending from one world to another. The bottom world is the world of action, Assiah; the second level is the world of formation, Jetzirah; the third world is the world of creation, Briah; the fourth and highest world is the world of emanation, Atziluth. At the final level, a person, usually through extensive meditation and a departure from the body, arrives in a state of total knowledge of the universe. All creation evolves around this goal.

Light plays an important role in the spiritual life of a Kabbalist. They refer to the Impression of Light as the source of humanity, the lower beings, who exist in the fallible state. God hovers above the fallible lower beings as the Infinite Encircling Light. He interacts with the fallible beings through a Line of Light in an attempt to help them reach perfection. The Line of Light is God's way of instilling perfection and abolishing all imperfection.

Qabalah is the "cultic" branch of Kabbalah. To the Qabalists, man exists parallel to the universe as a whole. Man's organs are like elements of the Universe. For example, blood maintains human life as it flows, much like the Universe is maintained by the "flow" of sunlight. Man's "nervous fluid" also governs his actions, but this fluid is entirely separate from the blood. There is only one connection between the nerve cell and the nerve receptor. Similarly, there is only one connection between God and man, a fluid that God emanates, the spirit of the Universe. Occultists call this spirit Universal Magnetism, but the Qabalists call it Aour. Therefore, both man and the Universe have the same three components: a body (physical), a life (blood and light), and a will (nervous fluid and Aour), but ". . . like Man, the Universe is subject to periodic involution and ultimately it will be reintegrated in its origin: God" (Encausse, 176).

Another aspect of Qabalah is the importance of numbers. Certain numbers found in the Torah can be analyzed to show their significance. For example, in the prophecy of Ezekiel, the first sentence reads, "And it came to pass in the thirtieth year of the fourth month." J. Charrot explains, " $3 \times 10 = 30$ decans, and $30 \times 12 = 360$ and $3 \times 24 = 72$ which is the ternary divided by four, giving 18. 30 decans in the cycle of 12, 12×30 , give 360 divisions of the church year in the cycle of 12 months pertaining to the 4 seasons of a civilization. By adding a 0 we arrived at 3600, 6 times the week of Moses; it is to be understood then that 1800 is only half a double civilization" (Levi, 25). Complicated explanations of individual passages from the sacred texts characterize the essence of mystical Qabalah.

Qabalists also believe that man is made of three elements: Nephesh, Neshamah, and Ruah. Nephesh is the lowest element and it is the "determining principle which accounts for the appearance of the material form" (Encausse, 171). The Neshamah is the highest element. It is the divine spark and "the spirit of the occultists" (Encausse, 171). The Ruah, the life or the soul, is the uniting force between the other two elements.

In the words of Everett Gendler, "Mysticism is an intense experience of direct connection with life's Source and Surrounding Purpose." For believers of both Qabalah and Kabbalah, mysticism brings them an understanding of the world around them. As they seek answers to the complexities of the universe, they ultimately find themselves.

--"Hassidic Sparks"--
by David Wolfe-Blank

"God alone has real existence and all else is illusion. The Divine is everywhere. There is none beside the Divine means that there is nothing beside the Divine."

"Human fulfillment depends on the overcoming of separations and balancing disharmonious relationships on every level of experience."

"Every individual should be regarded as potentially good as each has a 'holy spark.' The goodness within the other should be encouraged. No one is ultimately evil."

"One never knows what one's full resources are until one attempts the deed asked."

Only then does one discover the limits of one's capacities."

"Activities like prayer, song, and dance, in which one opens one's self directly and wholeheartedly are powerful means to personal unification."

"Despair is the greatest evil."

Prepared by Erin Ghelber

Soc 257: New Religious Movements

Spring Term, 1996

Last Modified: 07/16/01

<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/cultsect/concult.htm>

224 captures

28 Jan 2001 - 7 Apr 2022

Oct DEC Jan

15

2006 2007 2009

About this capture

Cult Group Controversies:

Conceptualizing "Cult" and "Sect"

Introduction

In 1993 David Bromley and I edited a two-volume work entitled *The Handbook of Cults and Sects in America*. In our introductory essay to that volume we wrote as follows:

"We have chosen to use the concepts "cults" and "sects" in the title of this volume for two reasons. First, the concepts do have more or less precise meanings as employed by social scientists. Second, it has become abundantly clear that after nearly two decades, the concept new religious movements has virtually no recognition either in the mass media or the general public. By calling attention to the concepts as they are used by social scientists, we hope to begin the long process of educating the mass media and public regarding the non-pejorative meaning of these words."

The Handbook was an excellent compendium of the state of knowledge on cults and sects when it was published, as is evidenced by the fact that articles appearing in the Handbook have been cited hundreds of times in scholarly literature. While some scholars of new religions have argued for jettisoning the concepts "cult" and "sect," including several contributors to the Handbook, not a single person has written and objected to the use of these terms in the title. Nor has anyone challenged the rationale for doing so.

When I began the construction of this web site in 1996, I assumed the same posture toward the use of these concepts. While I have long called my course "new religious movements," and have similarly identified the web site, I believe "cult" and "sect" are valuable concepts for scholarly discourse. Thus, when students began creating web pages, I created a common profile template that asked them to indicate whether their group was a cult or sect. At that point, the exercise was purely pedagogical. I wanted to be certain that my students could properly differentiate between cults and sects.

It wasn't too long before we began to get mail. Most of the communications were appreciative of our efforts to create a page that presented objective information. But there were also protests to the use of the concept cult. In response to a growing volume of mail, I wrote the brief essay entitled *The Concepts "Cult" and "Sect" in Scholarly Research and Public Discourse* "The Concepts 'Cult' and 'Sect' in Scholarly Research and Public Discourse" in May, 1997. While many people wrote back and thanked me for helping them better understanding my sociological perspective, I don't think many minds were changed.

In time I came to understand that it is difficult to see one's faith referred to as a cult, even in the context of scholarly inquiry. More telling still was the realization that some readers of this site were using the information of our pages to "prove" to someone else that a particular group really is a "cult."

The removal of the identification of origin from the group profiles is not a capitulation to Gresham's Law but, rather, recognition that the distinction between "cult" and "sect" is

not the primary educational objective of this web site.

We shall continue to promote an understanding of the utility of these concepts for sociological inquiry. By moving this inquiry off the Profile pages, we can explore the meaning of the concepts in more detail.

In the months ahead we will be adding significant new materials. We'll offer additional commentary on the primary concepts for sociological inquiry of religious movements. We'll also explore the meaning of the concepts cult and sect as they have been employed through times and by different groups. Links to other conceptual inquiries will also be added.

Jeffrey K. Hadden
06/25/99

Available on this page:

Key Concepts Defined

The Concepts "Cult" and "Sect" in Scholarly Research and Public Discourse

Also available in this site section:

Introduction

The Brainwashing Controversy

Conceptualizing "Anti-Cult" and "Counter-Cult"

The Anti-Cult Movement

The Counter-Cult Movement

Links

Bibliography

Other Resources

Some Key Definitions

(multiple definitions to be added here)

CHURCH: a conventional religious organization

SECT: a deviant religious organization with traditional beliefs and practices.

CULT: a deviant religious organization with novel beliefs and practices.

Stark and Bainbridge, 1987: 124 1

Key concepts for the study of religious movements are examined in my lecture Concepts of Our Inquiry. This lecture follows the conceptual framework initially set forth by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge in an article entitled "Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements" which appeared in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion in 1979 2 . These two authors further

elaborated these concepts in subsequent work. For additional readings that incorporate this conceptual perspective, see: Melton (1986) 3 and Hexham and Poewe (1997) 4.

The Concepts "Cult" and "Sect" in Scholarly Research and Public Discourse

The concept cult carries a heavy burden of cultural prejudice in public discourse, and the concept sect is only a little less pejorative. This is not something new, although the cry to abandon the use of the concepts may be.

So unpleasant is the popular meaning of the concept cult that no group or member of that group accepts this designation without protest. Similarly, few people feel unperturbed when the religious organization with they are affiliated is identified as a sect.

Because there is such a gaping chasm between popular usage and the language of social scientific inquiry, I offer here a few words of explanation and rationale for why social scientists should not succumb to the easy and politically correct decision to vacate these concepts.

First and foremost, these concepts have fairly precise meaning and important utility for the construction of social science theory. "Cults" and "sects," along with a set of derivative concepts (e.g., audience cult, client cult, cult movement, sect movement, etc.) carry clear meanings and tell us a lot about the origins, development and likely futures of groups.

To abandon the concepts "cult" and "sect," would likely result in an abdication of a good bit of the theoretical insight these concepts have spawned. That popular culture usage of these terms is inappropriate is not a reason to send science back to the drawing board in search of new words to convey the intellectual content of their theories. This, in my view, would be very bad science.

Forsaking or surrendering the use of perfectly good conceptual tools to those who seek to discredit, or even destroy, the groups these concepts define, is to allow scientific inquiry to be bludgeoned by a conceptual Gresham's law.

Social scientists do have a responsibility to communicate clearly the meaning of their concepts. And, some social scientists would argue, a responsibility to expose the agendas of those who exhibit intolerance for religious pluralism

During the 1970s, in the midst of the high visibility of sects and cults as part of the youth counterculture, many social scientists sought to desensitize the negative sentiments that the concepts conjure in popular culture by substituting the concept new religious movement (NRM).

I applauded this effort. Simply on the face of it, "new religious movements" appears to be a more value neutral term. In this respect, thus, the concept seemingly has

considerable utility. I use the concept regularly as witnessed by the title of my course and this web site.

There are clearly proper occasions to use the concept "new religious movement." It is an appropriate overarching concept when discourse means to communicate information that would be true of both cults and sects. It is not appropriate when we mean to communicate explicit knowledge about either "cults" or "sects." I think it is questionable whether it should be used as a surrogate for "cult" simply because "cult" is loaded with negative implications. Such usage, I would assert, is not appropriate for publications that are written for scholarly journals.

As an analytical tool, new religious movements has not proven to be nearly as robust as the concepts cult and sect. Putting aside for a moment the question of whether the concepts "cult and "sect" are critical for the advancement of science, I am not convinced, that "new religious movements" achieves the goals that those who introduced it had in mind.

1. It doesn't communicate profoundly important information that is carried by the separate concepts.
2. Its introduction invited a proliferation of additional concepts: "new religions," "contemporary new religions," "novel religions," etc., without adding anything to the conceptual clarity. The development of science is not served when every scholar behaves as an entrepreneur with his or her own preferred terms.
3. The use of the concept "new religious movements" in public discourse is problematic for the simple reason that it has not gained currency. Speaking bluntly from personal experience, when I use the concept "new religious movements," the large majority of people I encounter don't know what I'm talking about. I am invariably queried as to what I mean. And, at some point in the course of my explanation, the inquirer unfailing responds, "oh, you mean you study cults!"

Occasionally, I feel my use of the concept NRM has provided an opportunity to make a slight dent in the shield of prejudice that blocks otherwise open and intelligent minds from understanding the fascinating phenomena of cults and sects in human societies. Most of the time, however, I feel that what I have done is substitute a word that is not known for one that is and, thus, blocked an opportunity for meaningful communication.

In my own search for a method to create meaningful communication, I have found that telling people I study "weird" religions opens minds more readily than either the language of new religious movements or cults and sects. When I use the word "weird," lots of different religious groups enter people's consciousness.

Only occasionally do I get a puzzled look, or a probe to ask me to explain what I mean. Rather, people come right back with "oh, you mean like the [insert name]." To me, it is significant that the groups people select, and the sentiments they express often do not rouse the negative feelings that almost invariable accompany the use of the concept

cult.

Employing this unconventional approach, often affords me an opportunity to add a further comment or two rather than terminating meaningful conversation. I try to speak to my teaching objectives.

I tell them that I try to help students understand why these groups are usually not so weird as they seem. It is understandable that all religious traditions outside of one's own faith can seem a little strange. If Moonies seem a little more peculiar than Methodists, this is probably because we are more familiar with the latter than the former.

But, I say, there is an additional factor which clouds our ability to understand many unfamiliar religious groups. I refer to systematic propaganda disseminated by organizations who are committed to making certain religious groups look bad.

Understanding this phenomenon of "trashing" many religious traditions is perhaps better understood in a broader social context. Almost everyone, at some point in their life, experiences difficult relations with other individuals and with institutions with which they are affiliated. When this happens, friendships are broken, marriages are dissolved, and ties to organizations are severed.

Parting of ways can produce a considerable degree of acrimony, but most people soon get over their unhappiness and get on with their lives. But there are always a few who cope with their loss by engaging in an ongoing battle with individuals or organizations which with they were formerly affiliated.

Much of the mischief of the popular meaning of the word "cult" results from the organized efforts of disgruntled former members. These anti-cultists are joined by parents who blame "cults" for the decisions of their (usually) adult children to join groups that did not meet with their approval.

A therapeutic community has aligned itself with these persons, allegedly for the noble cause of assisting "victims" to get over the psychological damage inflicted upon them while they were affiliated with a "cult." Some members of this therapeutic community are credentialed, but many are merely self proclaimed "cult experts."

All of the so-called "cult experts" speak a language that purports to be scientific, but there is very little empirical evidence to support the large majority of their claims. But as frequently happens in politics, evidence can be overwhelmed by smooth rhetoric.

For almost two decades, the claims that cults engage in "brainwashing," "mind control," "sinister manipulation," "creation of environments of totalism," etc. went virtually unchallenged. During the 1990s, the tide has begun to change--at least in the judicial system. In California, a Federal District Court disallowed expert testimony about mind control because the content of the testimony was not grounded in scientific knowledge. This had the impact of sharpening curbing suits against new religions that were brought by

disgruntled former members at the encouragement of the anti-cult movement.

In another important legal case, a jury leveled a heavy financial judgment against a leading anti-cult organization, forcing it into bankruptcy. The anti-cultists are far from defeated as was evidenced by their high visibility as "experts" in the news coverage of the mass suicide of the members of the UFO cult, Heaven's Gate.

The contemporary anti-cult movement is a fairly recent phenomenon and, as noted, it proclaims science and rational thought as the foundation of its endeavors. The cause of the anti-cultists gains great support from another organized effort against cults and sects which can be identified as a counter-cult movement.

Counter-cultists find legitimacy for their cause in the belief that they alone exhibit fidelity to the faith. In the United States, at least, the counter-cultists are members of Christian sects. While they alone possess "true" or "correct" belief, the minions of heresy seem to be everywhere. The counter-cultists' cause is to reclaim the souls of those who have deserted the true faith for some false belief.

Interestingly, the counter-cultists are often harsher on "waywardness" within their faith tradition than they are of groups outside of their tradition. For example, one counter-cult web site that I recently reviewed devoted twenty-one pages a critique of the "Promise Keepers," a sectarian parachurch movement created by former University of Colorado football coach, Bill McCarthy. By contrast, Eckankar, a non-Christian and thoroughly controversial cult of the 1970s, received a scant two pages.

The counter-cultists and anti-cultists speak to different audiences. The counter-cultist aim their message at conservative Christian groups. They are prolific producers of books and pamphlets, as well as audio and video tapes from Christian radio and television. Most Christian book stores have a special section of cult literature. Some of the counter-cult groups focus their attention on a specific wayward group.

The Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists, for example, are groups frequently singled out for attention. These ministries define their role as (a) support for persons who have left the errant group, and (b) getting others within the erring tradition to return to the true faith.

The anti-cultists are prone to define all "cults" (which in their vocabulary includes both cults and sects) as dangerous. While providing therapeutic support for ex-members, their broader goal is to reach the public about the dangers of cults. The mass media is their preferred mode of communication. Many of them are skilled communicators and they are often permitted to present their views virtually unchallenged to large television audiences.

If scholars abandon the use of the concepts cult and sect, they capitulate to the anti-cultists and counter-cultists. They would also effectively be abdicating the theoretical ideas that these concepts have spawned.

I do not believe that any social scientist qua social scientist has a duty to defend the rights of cults and sects against their adversaries. The only duty of the social scientist qua social scientist is to strive for objectivity which will hopefully lead to insight and understanding about the subject of his or her inquiry.

Some social scientists may claim a duty to defend cults and sects because they believe that the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, which guarantees the right to establish and practice religion, should not be abridged. I unapologetically count myself in that number. But defense of religious liberty is no less for the established denominations.

So long as cults and sects do not act in ways that demonstrably diminish the rights of other citizens, they are entitled to the full protection of the Constitution to believe and practice as they choose.

Anti-cultists argue that "cults" do diminish the rights of those who enter their orbit and, further, they often use inappropriate techniques to draw people in. Most social scientists would not quarrel with the proposition that many religious movements use techniques of influence both to recruit and retain members.

What we do dispute is the idea that these techniques of influence are any different than the methods of influence that are widely used in every sector of human society. However personally deplorable I may find advertising to entice people to buy lottery tickets, it is not illegal.

Social scientists also dispute the proposition that individuals are helpless to break free of this influence without intervention. We have an abundance of empirical knowledge which demonstrates that the average person who joins a cult remains only a short while. People enter unconventional religious groups of their own volition, and when the group ceases to serve the purpose that initially attracted them to the group, they leave.

Many, if not most, students who come to my course assume the validity of the propaganda of the anti-cultists. Some come from evangelical Christian traditions where they learned views consistent with the views of counter-cultists. In the course of a term, I present them with the evidence as I understand it. Cult and sect formation are a normal part of religious life. So, also, is the response of the host culture to these new groups. This response is also fodder for our investigation.

I understand that people visit this site for a whole variety of reasons. The average person, most likely, has some limited objective. This site is being developed as a resource which will help people fulfill many different objectives. But this site is also being created as a resource to assist people in better understanding the so-called "cult controversies."

My class lecture notes, along with selected readings, offer a systematic examination of

a large number of questions that can help one better understand why "cults" are so controversial. How are cults and sects different? How do they form and develop? How central is the role of charismatic leader? Who joins and why? Is conversion a useful concept, or might we be better served by other concepts? What factors contribute to enhanced commitment or gradual disengagement? When and why do people leave? Why does the death of a founding leader result in a crisis of succession, and how is this usually resolved? Why are cults controversial, and what is the pathway that eventually leads some of them into the mainstream of society?

My notes are often abbreviated and truncated. Eventually they will be expanded so that they can stand alone without the benefit of the extemporaneous elaborations in the class room. I initially put the notes up for the benefit of students in my classes who seemed compelled to try and write down every word that appeared in my Power Point lectures. I subsequently determined to make the notes available to anyone on the Internet rather than wait until the notes were "polished."

The assigned readings that go with each lecture are critical to a comprehensive understanding of the argument I set forth in the course. There is a consistency in the use of key concepts in my lectures and the core readings. Naturally, this consistency breaks down when one utilizes the hundreds of hyperlinks available from this site.

In addition, I offer a selection of supplemental recommended readings. Everything assigned to my students, and most of the recommended materials, can be found in most college and university libraries. I hope eventually to be able to make these reading available on line to, but copyright and fair use prohibit doing this now.

One factor that frequently differentiates cults and sects from the established religious traditions of a culture is the belief of the latter that they are in possession of the truth, or at the very least, unique truths that other traditions do not have or have not accepted.

What is being created on this web site is not the truth or enlightenment as religious movements would understand these concepts. Rather, I seek to present a way for gaining insight about many questions relating to the growth and development of religious organizations and religious beliefs that may not readily be accessible from other perspectives. I try to do so with an open mind to all perspectives including the anti-cultists and counter-cultists.

My hope is this page will provide a model which will help realize the enormous potential of the Internet for learning.

REFERENCES

1. Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge, 1987.
A Theory of Religion. New York: Peter Land. [Reprinted, 1996 by Rutgers University Press]
2. Stark, Rodney, and Williams Sims Bainbridge, 1979.

"Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movement." Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. 18:2; 117-131.

3. Melton, J. Gordon, 1986.

Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America. New York: Garland Publishing. pp. 3-20.

4. Hexham, Irvine, and Karla Poewe, 1997.

New Religions as Global Cultures. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. pp. 27-40.

5. Stark, Rodney, and William Sims Bainbridge, 1985.

The Future of Religion. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Go back to the top of this page.

Last updated: 06/25/99

Copyright © the Religious Movements Page. All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/>

561 captures

5 Dec 1998 - 10 Dec 2025

Sep OCT Mar

24

2006 2007 2008

About this capture

Hermetic Kabbalah

This site

is dedicated to publishing modern material

on Kabbalah and related topics

Hermetic Kabbalah - the Big Picture

An attempt to represent in one diagram the mystical, religious and esoteric traditions that combine in Hermetic Kabbalah.

Emanation and Ascent in Hermetic Kabbalah (1.4 Mbyte PDF)

© Colin Low 2004. Presentation and notes on the mystical and historical roots of Hermetic Kabbalah.

Kabbalah FAQ

Created for the Usenet and posted for some years, it grew very large and now lives here. It has an extensive reading list combining Hermetic and traditional Jewish Kabbalah.

Kabbalah Booklist - Amazon.co.uk

A wide selection of Kabbalah books you can find at Amazon's UK site

Kabbalah Booklist - Amazon.com

A wide selection of Kabbalah books you can find at Amazon's US site

Don Karr's Bibliographic Surveys

Detailed and extensive surveys of publications in English on various Kabbalistic themes. Recommended.

Don Karr's Solomonian Magic

Liber Salomonis: Cephaz Razi'el, Liber Lunae, and other selections from British Library Sloane MS 3826. Transcribed, annotated and introduced by Don Karr. According to legend, Adam received secret wisdom from the angel Razi'el, and a number of texts (of widely differing origins) claim to be the mysterious book of the angel Razi'el. This is one such text.

Don Karr's Selected Writings of FM van Helmont

The Cabbalistical Dialogues, Chapter IV of the Paradoxal Discourses, and an appendix from The Divine Being and its Attributes. Transcribed, annotated and introduced by Don Karr.

Don Karr's Kabbalah of Maat

The 20th century saw the development and elaboration of a line of Kabbalistic speculation which derives its impulse from information channeled by Aleister Crowley and published as The Book of the Law. Don Karr provides a substantial overview and bibliography of these ideas in Approaching the Kabbalah of Maat: Altered Trees and the Procession of the Aeons. He also contributes four original works on the subject.

Kabbalah In English by Jeffrey Smith

"A Guide to English Language Resources for the Student of Traditional Rabbinic Kabbalah". An excellent bibliographic essay and literature review. Even if you aren't into the sources of Rabbinic Kabbalah, this essay provides the kind of information that any student of Kabbalah should at least be aware of.

Abramelin Lecture by Bill Heidrick

Abramelin lectures assembled from the Thelema Lodge Calendar. If you read nothing else here, read this.

Notes on Kabbalah by Colin Low

Originally posted as a series on the Usenet, these notes provide a substantial book-length introduction to the author's tradition of Hermetic Kabbalah.

Ritual Theory and Technique by Colin Low

A modern view of ritual which attempts to provide a basis for understanding how ritual works. Much of this material was subsumed into Notes on Kabbalah, but if you prefer the original, shorter, Kabbalah-free version, read this.

A Miscellany of Essays by Colin Low

Some people count on their fingers. Others move their lips when they read. I write.

The Road to the Sun, Part 1 and The Road to the Sun, Part 2 by Bill Heidrick

Bill comments "Illustrations described. Needs introduction, content table, work on two

appendices and index. IN LATE DRAFT. An Autobiographical work describing self-initiation to Tipheret. Contains bits of philosophy, Qabalah, Magick and short writings."

Memory Theatre

Images on the Tree of Life, organised after the manner of a memory theatre.

Magical Images on the Tree by Jan Swanson (71k JPG)

These are images associated with the sephiroth.

Magical Correspondences by Bill Heidrick.

Bill comments: "Most of the Golden Dawn Qabalistic Spirits in tables for the elements, signs and planets. Includes corrections, source notations and translations. Several discussions of Berashit Qabalah and other topics. A work expected to grow over time".

Qabalah #1 by Bill Heidrick

Bill comments: "A booklet of exercises and meditations on the Tree of Life. Diagrams described. Completed but could benefit by proofreading."

Magick and Qabalah #1 by Bill Heidrick

Bill comments "A booklet discussing the Bornless Ritual, Lesser Pentagram Banishment, method of translating and creating Abra-Melin squares, and a Merkabah style ritual using the Golden Dawn pantheon. Completed but could benefit by proofreading"

32 Emanations by Bill Heidrick

The 32 Paths of Wisdom, with a large quantity of supplementary material.

Kabbalistic Magic: On How to Use the Mystical Interpretations of the Jewish Holy Books in Adventure Role-Playing Games by Simcha Kuritzky

This is an odd one. Written for a Role Playing Game audience, it also happens to be one of the best short introductions to traditional Kabbalistic magic I have seen. Exceptionally well-informed.

High Magick: The Elemental Adept, by Suba

Essay on elemental and ritual work. Contains personal experiences, tutorial material, advice, ritual techniques and a good deal of practical wisdom.

The 50 Gates of Understanding by Bill Heidrick

The 32 Paths of Wisdom (Chokhmah) are well known, but the 50 Gates of Understanding (Binah) less so. This is a short article originally published in the Thelema Lodge Calendar and re-published here with permission.

The 50 Gates of Understanding by Jeff Spiegel

Written in response to Bill Heidrick's article above, it presents a traditional Jewish view of the 50 Gates.

TechGnosis by Erik Davis (posted to Usenet)

An essay which deconstructs the Hermetic and Gnostic worlds of the magician to unravel a golden thread which permeates cyberspace and cyberculture. Brilliant. You can find more of Davis's wonderful essays at Erik Davis' Figments. See also the 1998 book also titled Techgnosis.

The Kircher Tree

In many places in Bill Heidrick's notes he refers to the "Kircher Tree". This is the Kircher Tree of Life, from Oedipus Aegyptiacus published in 1652 by Athanasius Kircher, a Jesuit priest.

Kabbalah Links Page

The largest collection of Kabbalah links on the WWW (probably)

Britannica.com

Many of these documents are very large and need substantial editing to convert them to HTML. Anyone wishing to do this is welcome, so long as all copyright headers and footers are retained. Let me know if you create an HTML version of any of these documents.

This site is maintained by Colin Low. Last updated 31st. October 2006

Feedback to cal@digital-brilliance.com

Due to the colossal quantity of spam I receive, it is now better to mail Please don't use this mail address in plaintext anywhere.

logo

Sephiroth.org

What you need, when you need it

Search

Main

» Kabbalah

» Judaica

» Neopets Graphics

» Neopets Guild Layouts

» Neopets

» Flash Animation

Popular

Wiccan «

Guild Layouts For Neopets «

Neopets Userlookup «

Mysticism «

Free Web Designs «

Depression «

Sephiroth.org favorites: [Userlookups](#) | [Sephiroth.orgpetcare](#) | [Origins Of Evil](#) | [Kingdom Hearts](#) | [Cthulhu](#)

© Sephiroth.org 2007

<http://webcom.com/hermit/welcome.html>

49 captures

18 Apr 1999 - 13 Mar 2021

Aug OCT May

16

2006 2007 2009

[About this capture](#)

Not Found

Your request could not be fulfilled because the Location you requested could not be found. The Location may have been mistyped, or you may have followed a link or bookmark to a page that no longer exists.

If you think you have mistyped the Location, please try again.

If you have followed an invalid link or bookmark, you may be able to find the main page of the site by removing the filename from the URL. For instance, if "http://www.domain.ext/obsolete.html" is the URL that you followed here, try entering just "http://www.domain.ext/" in your browser.

Note to WebCom users: The way WebCom custom error messages work have recently changed! For more information please see our documentation.

Copyright © 1995 - 2001 Web Communications

<http://www.think.com/users/cward/WWW/qabalah.html>

36 captures

29 Apr 1999 - 29 Jun 2011

Oct DEC May

26

2006 2007 2011

[About this capture](#)

[Think.com](#)[Think.com](#)[ThinkQuestLibrary](#)
[Support](#)
[Home](#)

Page Not Found

The page you tried was not found. You may have used an outdated link or may have typed the address (URL) incorrectly. You might find what you're looking for by clicking one of the tab options above or jump to our main site by clicking the link below.

www.think.com

[Privacy Policy](#) • [Terms of Use](#) • [Contact Us](#)
<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclasstoc.html>
34 captures
22 Apr 2001 - 27 May 2010
Jun AUG Oct
06
2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition
by Cynthia Gregory
Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

Table of Contents

1. Class Information
2. The Spiral Path
3. Grounding and The Circle

- 4. Elements
- 5. The Goddess
- 6. The God
- 7. Working Magic
- 8. Celebrations
- 9. Appendix
- Imbolc/Brigid

1. CLASS INFORMATION

Class Format: 3 class series

Curriculum:

- 1. Casting the Circle and the Elements: How To Begin
- 2. The Goddess: and God. The God: Paradox Of The Untamable And The Sacrifice
- 3. Working Magic: Creating Change

Class will be experiential and in ritual format. You get more out of the class if you actively participate. There will be opportunities to lead invocations and other parts of the ritual as the class progresses. You won't be pushed (well, maybe gently). When you feel ready, please volunteer, or be willing to stretch your spiritual muscles and take a risk. Using ritual, we will cover the practice of grounding and purification; the elements and casting a circle, divinity in female and male aspects, and working magic. Plan to attend all sessions and call if unable to show up.

2. THE SPIRAL PATH

Wicca is an earth-based religion with a humanist bent, based on the immanence of the sacred within all. It is polytheistic and inclusive, with both male and female deities. Wicca is a practice rather than a dogma.

Wiccan is a religion of doing. It is practical. If it works do it. What witches¹ do is ritual and magic. The rituals vary with the seasons, the needs and the creativity of the participants. Some rituals draw on old traditions and are celebrations of the interplay of earth and sun. Some are new, designed to meet immediate needs. They can be completely spontaneous and or planned in detail. The purpose is to connect our energy with that of the worlds and to create change in our lives and the environment we live in. We call that magic, others may call it prayer.

The practice of Wicca generally done as individuals or in small groups. Thus it is highly individualistic, creative and flexible. There is very little in the way of creed and no national, universally accepted hierarchy. There are a variety of flavors from those who recreate the feel of Celtic Druids, those who worship Goddesses only, faeries, the eclectic traditions and everything in between. Some use a very disciplined approach, others a more playful. The freedom to create what serves your needs is openly acknowledged and valued in this religion.

Wicca is a religion of engagement. Instead of looking to transcend our human existence, we embrace our humanity. Our bodies and imaginations are our primary tools for working magic. Because our bodies are the manifestation of the earth, the spirit is not valued over the body. As the Goddess says, " All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals."

As an earth based practice, Wicca is a way of interacting with the world, of acknowledging the cycles of the seasons; of light and dark; of birth and death. Wicca confirms the significance of these cycles in our lives. The goal is over time to achieve balance with the forces of nature. We flow with the natural processes of creation and decay.

The planting of spring brings the growth of summer. The harvest that follows is the death and sacrifice of grain to the continuing force of life. The fallowness of winter is a time of rest within the dark season that prepares us for the renewal and work of spring.

Without death there is no renewal, no room for new life. Without accepting pain, anger and fear as a natural part of life, joy is shallow and has no root. All emotions have reasons for being and to deny the power of any is to lose the lessons they can teach us. It is right to be angry at injustice. It is wise to fear what can harm us and to protect ourselves. It is important to pay attention to pain and to look for its root causes.

Often the lessons of the dark are avoided. We even use the term enlightenment to mean wisdom. Through Wicca we seek a deeper wisdom. Wisdom that has learned the value of endarkenment. The wisdom gained through the courage of looking inward, into our heart and our soul. Underground , in the decay of the grave, we find the power of transformation that is rooted in destruction, when that which is dead nourishes the young seedling. Death releases our prior form and energy so a new elemental form can emerge. This is the power of renewal, germination and rebirth. The Goddess is both dark and light.

The Goddess is balanced by the God as the earth is balanced by the sun. The God leads us into the untamed wildness within us. That primeval part of ourselves that resonates with the stag, master of his forest home. His power is charged with sexual energy, fertile and potent. Not only is he untamed but he cannot be tamed. The paradox of the God is that he is both the wild horned one and the willing sacrifice to the life force. His sacrifice is symbolized by his Corn God aspect. He is the mystery of the grain, which must be cut down to sustain life as sacred bread.

The God and Goddess, like earth and sun, are in motion relative to each other. Not static but ever changing as the light and warmth we feel changes while the earth tips her face to the sun. This relationship is celebrated in the seasonal holidays of solstices, equinoxes and cross-quarter days.

A spiral represents our path through life. As we move from birth to death, passing through

the seasons many times, celebrating the holidays, we are different each time we experience them. We grow in body and wisdom from our beginning and feel our waning as we move into old age. Wicca is a tool for harmonizing with the natural elements, the cycles and the male/female energies both within and outside ourselves. Wicca is a way of accepting the natural ebb and flow we all experience and wisely working with it to accomplish our goals.

Basic Ritual Format

Preparation: Ground and purify participants

Cast the Circle: Create sacred space.

Invoke the elements.

East: Air

South: Fire

West: Water

North: Earth

Invoke the Goddess (Triple)

Invoke the God (Horned)

Magical Work: Cone of Power; Spiral Dance

Feast: Bread (Cakes) and Wine.

Devoke and Close.

1 I use the word witch in spite of the connotations to connect with the spirit of those who suffered for the Goddess during the Inquisition.

[top](#)

[TOC](#)

[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclasstoc.html>

34 captures

22 Apr 2001 - 27 May 2010

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition
by Cynthia Gregory
Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

Table of Contents

1. Class Information
2. The Spiral Path
3. Grounding and The Circle
4. Elements
5. The Goddess
6. The God
7. Working Magic
8. Celebrations
9. Appendix
Imbolc/Brigid

1. CLASS INFORMATION

Class Format: 3 class series

Curriculum:

1. Casting the Circle and the Elements: How To Begin
2. The Goddess: and God. The God: Paradox Of The Untamable And The Sacrifice
3. Working Magic: Creating Change

Class will be experiential and in ritual format. You get more out of the class if you actively participate. There will be opportunities to lead invocations and other parts of the ritual as the class progresses. You won't be pushed (well, maybe gently). When you feel

ready, please volunteer, or be willing to stretch your spiritual muscles and take a risk. Using ritual, we will cover the practice of grounding and purification; the elements and casting a circle, divinity in female and male aspects, and working magic. Plan to attend all sessions and call if unable to show up.

2. THE SPIRAL PATH

Wicca is an earth-based religion with a humanist bent, based on the immanence of the sacred within all. It is polytheistic and inclusive, with both male and female deities. Wicca is a practice rather than a dogma.

Wiccan is a religion of doing. It is practical. If it works do it. What witches¹ do is ritual and magic. The rituals vary with the seasons, the needs and the creativity of the participants. Some rituals draw on old traditions and are celebrations of the interplay of earth and sun. Some are new, designed to meet immediate needs. They can be completely spontaneous and or planned in detail. The purpose is to connect our energy with that of the worlds and to create change in our lives and the environment we live in. We call that magic, others may call it prayer.

The practice of Wicca generally done as individuals or in small groups. Thus it is highly individualistic, creative and flexible. There is very little in the way of creed and no national, universally accepted hierarchy. There are a variety of flavors from those who recreate the feel of Celtic Druids, those who worship Goddesses only, faeries, the eclectic traditions and everything in between. Some use a very disciplined approach, others a more playful. The freedom to create what serves your needs is openly acknowledged and valued in this religion.

Wicca is a religion of engagement. Instead of looking to transcend our human existence, we embrace our humanity. Our bodies and imaginations are our primary tools for working magic. Because our bodies are the manifestation of the earth, the spirit is not valued over the body. As the Goddess says, " All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals."

As an earth based practice, Wicca is a way of interacting with the world, of acknowledging the cycles of the seasons; of light and dark; of birth and death. Wicca confirms the significance of these cycles in our lives. The goal is over time to achieve balance with the forces of nature. We flow with the natural processes of creation and decay.

The planting of spring brings the growth of summer. The harvest that follows is the death and sacrifice of grain to the continuing force of life. The fallowness of winter is a time of rest within the dark season that prepares us for the renewal and work of spring.

Without death there is no renewal, no room for new life. Without accepting pain, anger and fear as a natural part of life, joy is shallow and has no root. All emotions have reasons for being and to deny the power of any is to lose the lessons they can teach us.

It is right to be angry at injustice. It is wise to fear what can harm us and to protect ourselves. It is important to pay attention to pain and to look for its root causes.

Often the lessons of the dark are avoided. We even use the term enlightenment to mean wisdom. Through Wicca we seek a deeper wisdom. Wisdom that has learned the value of endarkenment. The wisdom gained through the courage of looking inward, into our heart and our soul. Underground, in the decay of the grave, we find the power of transformation that is rooted in destruction, when that which is dead nourishes the young seedling. Death releases our prior form and energy so a new elemental form can emerge. This is the power of renewal, germination and rebirth. The Goddess is both dark and light.

The Goddess is balanced by the God as the earth is balanced by the sun. The God leads us into the untamed wildness within us. That primeval part of ourselves that resonates with the stag, master of his forest home. His power is charged with sexual energy, fertile and potent. Not only is he untamed but he cannot be tamed. The paradox of the God is that he is both the wild horned one and the willing sacrifice to the life force. His sacrifice is symbolized by his Corn God aspect. He is the mystery of the grain, which must be cut down to sustain life as sacred bread.

The God and Goddess, like earth and sun, are in motion relative to each other. Not static but ever changing as the light and warmth we feel changes while the earth tips her face to the sun. This relationship is celebrated in the seasonal holidays of solstices, equinoxes and cross-quarter days.

A spiral represents our path through life. As we move from birth to death, passing through the seasons many times, celebrating the holidays, we are different each time we experience them. We grow in body and wisdom from our beginning and feel our waning as we move into old age. Wicca is a tool for harmonizing with the natural elements, the cycles and the male/female energies both within and outside ourselves. Wicca is a way of accepting the natural ebb and flow we all experience and wisely working with it to accomplish our goals.

Basic Ritual Format

Preparation: Ground and purify participants

Cast the Circle: Create sacred space.

Invoke the elements.

East: Air

South: Fire

West: Water

North: Earth

Invoke the Goddess (Triple)

Invoke the God (Horned)

Magical Work: Cone of Power; Spiral Dance

Feast: Bread (Cakes) and Wine.

Devoke and Close.

1 I use the word witch in spite of the connotations to connect with the spirit of those who suffered for the Goddess during the Inquisition.

[top](#)

[TOC](#)

[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclass1.html>

9 captures

6 Oct 2003 - 10 Oct 2008

May JUN Oct

25

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

by Cynthia Gregory
Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

2. GROUNDING AND THE CIRCLE

Preparing Yourself

Rituals are more effective if you spend some time making yourself receptive and aware of the work you are about to undertake. Center and focus on what you are doing. Be in the moment and let go of distractions. Mentally separate yourself from everyday, ordinary reality. Let your imagination, your mind run free.

Salt Water Purification²

(If practicing in a group, form a circle sitting on the ground or floor, if possible, and hold hands.³

Keep the circle intact as much as you can by touching the person's body who is preparing the salt water.) Fill a bowl with water. Using your sacred knife⁴ stir salt into the water saying

" Salt and water, water and salt,
Inner and outer, body and spirit.
Be cleansed, be purified,
Be transformed."

Pass the bowl to the person on your left, who takes it with both hands. Hold the bowl in both hands and look into the water. Envision the stresses of the day, the distractions, any tension or negative feelings that would impede you during the ritual flowing from you into the bowl, as you speak these words.

" I cast into this bowl _____ (any of the impediments). Be purified, be transformed." (If doing this in a group, you can silently cast anything into the bowl you don't wish to share with the group at this time.) Take a sip of the salt water and pass the bowl to the person to your left.⁵

Grounding

The concept of grounding is similar to the electrical principle of negative ions flowing into the earth. Guided meditations are often used for grounding and as a further preparatory step to casting a circle. Various meditations called the "Tree of Life" are often used at this point in a ritual to connect to the earth and sky.

Standing or sitting in a circle, with hands joined.

"Gather your tensions up, your energy. Bring it from your finger tips into the center of

your body.

Gather the energy from your toes and legs and bring it into you center. Take the energy and tension from your head and face, from your neck and shoulders, gather it up, bringing it into the center of your body.

Now bring it down your chest, your belly, down your spine. Down your body and out through the floor and into the ground like the root of a tree, your energy grows down into the earth . Let it flow down into the earth, through the surface, down through the layers of rock and roots. Down deep into the earth, deeper and deeper down past the hot molten layer and into the core, the center, the heart of the earth. Feel your energy heat up with the earth's heat. Feel it join with the energy of the others. Feel it heat to the point of purification, all the negative and waste burning away. (Pause for a while.)

Now feel your energy , cleansed and renewed, separate from the core's mass and begin to rise. Feel it rise up the same path through the earth. Higher back through the molten layer, through rocks and roots to the surface. Back through the floor and into your body.

Let it flow throughout your body , to the extremities, through your organs up, your spine and into your shoulders and neck. Feel your renewed energy flow up into your head, into your crown and out the crown towards the sky. It moves up till you can feel the cool air of the heavens and can touch the moon and stars with your energy. Let you energy run free with the stars. Let it rain back into yourself.

You feel open, a channel between earth and sky. You feel powerful and sacred and ready. Cleansed, in touch and ready to work magic."

Casting the Circle

Casting a circle is an act of intention creating a safe and sacred place in which to work and worship. A circle can be cast in any space, indoors or out, that has enough room for you and/or your group to do the ritual. The act of casting a circle creates a separation from ordinary reality. Use your mind's eye to see the circle as a physical barrier surrounding you like a sphere. Only that which you invite may enter and everything you banish is outside this sacred world.

Before beginning the ritual, set up your altars in the East, South, West , North and Center (optional). The altar can be as simple as a point candle in the appropriate color, perhaps with an altar cloth, or as elaborate as you wish.

Altars often include the tool for that element, flowers, rocks, plants, bowls of earth, and seasonal decorations. For example, the western altar for Samhain (Halloween), usually has mementos of the dead that we wish to honor and remember during the ritual.

Take the salt water that was used in the purification and asperge the perimeter of the circle beginning in the East and working clockwise around to the East again.

"Salt and sea of ill stay free"

Light incense or a candle and cense the circle beginning in the East and working clockwise around to the East again.

"Fire and air draw all that's fair."

Take your athame (sacred knife) in you most powerful hand and beginning in the East, carve the circle in the air, again clockwise.

"Athame, draw the circle round about power stay in, world stay out."

"Athame draw the circle round about magic stay in, world stay out."

To make the circle stronger, repeat each revolution three⁶ times with each incantation before going to the next.

After the circle is cast, the elements (next lesson), Goddess and gods are invoked, magic is worked, season celebrated.

Circles are cast clockwise (sunwise) and opened counterclockwise (widdershins).⁷

Always devoke any deities called and open a circle after casting one, don't just walk away and back into mundane reality. To open, walk around the perimeter beginning in the North, counterclockwise, holding your athame. Devoke the elements at each point candle. Return to the center and say,

"The circle is open but unbroken, may the peace of the goddess stay in your heart, merry meet and merry part, and merry meet again. Blessed Be."

top

2 Salt was known to the ancients as a preservative. Egyptians used a brine solution called natron or birth fluid in the mummification process. Salt water was thought of as the Mother's regenerative blood. Salt was a symbol of kinship, used by Romans in marriage rites and by Arabs to bind covenants. Christians used it to bless and anoint church bells.

3 Working in groups involves frequent hand contact; those with colds, cold sores, etc. would do the group a favor by thoroughly washing hands before the start of the ritual. When the bowl or chalice is passed, simply touch it to your forehead instead of taking a sip if you are concerned about contagion.

4 The sacred knife or athame is traditionally a double-bladed, black-handled knife that has been magnetized and consecrated for ritual use. A kitchen knife can be used as well and is particularly effective for kitchen witches. Consecrating a tool and using it for sacred purposes increases its power to work magick for you.

5 Passing objects to your left is called going deosil, or sunwise, the direction of the sun's path which is symbolic of increase. Passing objects to your right is called going widdershins, counterclockwise, which significant of decrease. You will use these directions during ritual and magick depending on the results desired.

6 The number 3 is a common power number in many religions as well as Wicca, i.e., the Triple Goddess, holy Trinity, etc.

7 Sunwise is the direction of increase, creation and strengthening and widdershins of decrease, destruction and decay.

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclass2.html>

10 captures

6 May 2001 - 10 Oct 2008

Jan AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2005

[About this capture](#)

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition

by Cynthia Gregory

Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

3. ELEMENTS

Ancient peoples recognized the four elements of air, water, fire and earth as the building blocks of the universe. From the first written language of the Sumerians, to poets and

artists today the images conjured by the elements have a power that spans cultures and time.⁸

Calling the Elements

FORMAL INVOCATION

All face east and turn palms of hands towards the East. Three people approach the altar. The person on the left holds the incense (can substitute a lighted candle if you wish to avoid smoke), the person in the center the athame (wand, sword), and on the right the salt water. The center person knocks 3 times on the wall, altar table, or ground with the athame, raises it in the air pointing towards the East and addresses the East with an invocation.

The invocation can be written in advance and memorized (for more formal occasions), inspired in the moment (most common) or if necessary read (the least desirable, reading interferes with the flow of the ritual.) The invocation usually begins with a greeting to the direction and ends with the words "Be here now, Blessed Be."⁹ which are repeated by the group. Draw a five-pointed star or pentacle in the air with the athame in an invoking direction.¹⁰

The one holding the salt-water sprinkles the east three times with the salt-water and says, " With salt (earth) and water, I purify the East."

The person with the incense draws a pentacle in the air with the incense and says, "With fire and air, I sanctify the East."

Continue to the South and follow the same pattern to invoke each direction in turn. After invoking the North return to the East to complete the circle before coming to the center. In the center, point the athame to the sky and the earth saying: " As above, so below. The circle is cast. The ritual is begun. What is between the worlds, concerns not the worlds, yet will change the worlds."

INFORMAL INVOCATION

Face the east and chant turning to face each direction in turn.

Repeat three times.

DEVOKE Devoke or release the elements at the close of the ritual starting in the north. With the athame draw a devoking pentacle¹¹ or star as you thank the element for its presence and aid during your ritual.

A typical devocation: " Go if you must. Stay if you will. And if you must go I bid you hail and farewell."

Invocations are based on understanding the symbology of the elements, the purpose of

this ritual, and on the present needs of the individual or group. Tables of correspondences are an aid to understanding what the elements mean, how they balance each other and how to work with them.

TABLE OF CORRESPONDENCES

DIRECTION

ELEMENT

ASPECT

COLOR

TOOL

TIME OF DAY

EAST

SOUTH

WEST

NORTH

CENTER

AIR

FIRE

WATER

EARTH

ETHER

MIND

WILL

EMOTION

BODY

TRANSFORMATION

YELLOW

RED

BLUE

GREEN

BLACK/WHITE

ATHAME
WAND
CHALICE
PENTACLE
CAULDRON

DAWN
NOON
EVENING
MIDNIGHT
BEYOND TIME

SEASON

GODDESS

GOD

SOUND

PHYSICAL

SABBAT

SPRING
SUMMER
AUTUMN
WINTER
TURNING WHEEL

NUIT
BRIDGET
YEMAYA
GAIA
ISIS

HERMES
VULCAN
POSEIDON
DIONYSUS
OSIRIS

YA
RA

VA
LA
MA

BREATH
VITAL HEAT
BLOOD
BODY
SPIRIT

OSTARA
LITHA
MABON
YULE

8 See reference from Barbara Walker's The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets. I can't say it any better.

9 "Blessed Be" is a phrase often found in Wiccan ritual and is usually repeated by the group whenever it is used.

10 Begin at the top point and draw to bottom left, to upper right, then across to upper left, down to bottom right and back to top point.

11 Opposite to the invoking direction.

top
TOC
home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclass3.html>

11 captures

28 Apr 2003 - 10 Oct 2008

May AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

<

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition
by Cynthia Gregory
Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

4. THE GODDESS

Maiden, Mother and Crone

The earliest image of the divine is female. Since woman is the birth giver, it is natural to see the mystery of the creation of life as feminine. The secret of fertility is in her realm. She grows the egg within her body as the earth grows the seeds under ground. From the darkness of her womb she pushes forth the infant and nourishes him with milk from her breasts. The role of woman parallels that of the earth.

The darkness of the womb is similar to the darkness of the tomb and the Goddess is also associated with death and regeneration. Symbols of death and rebirth are found in her ancient temples. Because She controlled rebirth, Her representations are frequently correlated with the burial customs of the people. She is sometimes represented as a vulture or a sow. She tends the cauldron of regeneration and transformation.

The early people were holistic thinkers and felt closely tied to the earth and the animals around them. They used image to communicate and their Goddesses frequently took on the forms of animals or were closely associated with animals. Figures of bird and snake Goddesses are commonly found from the Neolithic to the Paleolithic eras. For at least 500,000 years people have been producing Goddess figures, building temples for her and worshipping her. Is it any wonder then that rediscovering the Goddess is for many people like coming home?

Today She is coming back into Her power as image begins to balance the word. Feminine values of nurturance come into balance with the patriarchal. We realize that the values of respect for the earth and the sacredness of the other creatures we share this planet with, will save us from destroying ourselves. Wiccans have reached back to

our roots to get in touch with our own Goddess power and to understand her relevance to our lives today.

The Triple Goddess, Maiden, Mother and Crone contains the single-mindedness of youth, the nurturing love and sexuality of the mother, and the transformative powers of the crone. She is known by many names throughout the world and over the millennia. The names you call her by should be names that are meaningful and powerful for you.

The Charge of the Goddess¹²

"Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who of old was known by many names:

' Whenever you are in need, when the moon is full and at the turning of the seasons assemble in a sacred place and adore the spirit of the Queen of the Wise. Sing, feast, dance, love, all in my presence. For mine is ecstasy of the spirit and joy on earth. My law is love unto all beings, nor do I demand sacrifice for I am the Mother of all things and my love is poured out upon the earth.'

Hear the words of the Star Goddess, the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven, whose body encircles the universe:

' I who am the beauty of the green earth, the white moon among the stars, and the mysteries of the waters call upon you. Rise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe. From me all things proceed and unto me they must return. Let my worship be in the heart that rejoices, for all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals.

Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you. You who would seek to know me, know that seeking and yearning will avail you not unless you understand the mystery. If that which you seek you find not within you shall never find it without. For I have been with you from the beginning and I am that which is found at the end of desire."

When you invoke the Goddess, think of the aspects of her strength and power that you need in your life and call her with the name that you associate with that aspect of her. Perhaps you call Athena when dealing with work-city related issues, Bridget for healing or creating with the written word, Yemaya when you need the cleansing power of the ocean, Ceridwen if you need a transformation, Pele if you need fire power. Invoke her power into yourself and from within yourself. Open up to her inspiration as you chant to welcome her. Visualize her presence. Ask for her blessing. But remember, she is not always beautiful. Sometimes the needed transformations she brings about are difficult, intense and frightening. Blessed Be.

Invocations

We all come from the God--dess and to her we shall re--turn.

Like a drop of----- ra--in flow-ing to the ooo--o--cean

Bridget Invocation: (Repeat 3 times)

Bridget of the forge fire,
Bridget of the healing well,
Bridget of the rhyming word,
Come weave your spell.

Hecate/Ceridwen Invocation:

Hecate, Ceridwen, Dark Mother take me in.
Hecate, Ceridwen, let me be reborn.
Hecate, Ceridwen, Dark Mother take me in.
Hecate, Ceridwen, let me be transformed.

Hecate Invocation: Hecate, Lady of the crossroads, I stand where three paths meet,
Hecate, Lady of the crossroads, I ask that you guide my feet.
Hecate, Lady of the crossroads

12 Adapted. See Doreen Valiente, Starhawk...

top
TOC
home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclass4.html>

6 captures

6 May 2001 - 10 Oct 2008

May AUG Oct

10

2001 2004 2008

About this capture

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition
by Cynthia Gregory

5. THE GOD

Horned One

The God is the balancing force for the Goddess. They are not in opposition to each other but in partnership and relationship. When the Goddess is Mother, the God can be Son. When She is Maiden, He may be Brother. At Beltaine they love each other with the strength and lust of youth. When he is cut down with the corn, She grieves as the Dark Hag.

Our image of the God comes from pre-Christian sources and from our own imagining of a non-patriarchal God, strong in his own right not at the expense of the female. Prehistoric people portrayed His image in the bull-heads mounted on temple walls and at the entrance to tombs. The Celtic people revered Cernunnos or Herne the Hunter, a stag-horned god associated with abundance and success. Neoplatonic philosophers called the Horned God Pentamorph; "He of the five shapes"; Human, Bull, Ram, Goat, Stag.

The God is the wildness of nature, the untamed and untamable aspect of divinity and ourselves. He is exuberant, erotic and animal. He has horns like the stag to represent his oneness with his animal nature. He is desire. "Desire is erotic glue that holds the worlds together." His is the magic of the phallus, the shape-shifter, rising and falling only to rise again.

He is also the sun and the corn. The energy of sun turned into grain. As such he is the willing sacrifice whose death feeds life. The yearly cycle of his birth, growth, death and rebirth mirrors our own. He is our guide, our comforter, consoling us through his example.

Invocations:

HOOF AND HORN CHANT

Hoof and horn, hoof and horn,
All that dies shall be reborn
Corn and grain, corn and grain
All that falls shall rise again

SEED SOWER

Seed sower, grain reborn, Horned One, come!

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclass5.html>

13 captures

23 May 2003 - 10 Oct 2008

May AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition

by Cynthia Gregory

Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

6. WORKING MAGIC

" A spell is a symbolic act done in an altered state of consciousness, in order to cause a desired change." --Starhawk: The Spiral Dance

Magic is the ability to change; to change yourself and the world around you. This is not such an unusual ability; Christians say prayers, lay on hands in an effort to accomplish the same kind of change. With the power to work magic comes responsibility. This is not a religion for power-over-others seekers. The prime rule of Wicca is " Do what you will and harm ye none." This simple statement is not so simple in action. Knowing what your will is requires living consciously and facing the truth¹⁴. Harming none means giving up knowing what is best for other people as well as doing no active harm.

The question often comes up of how to deal with evil, with someone who is doing you or someone you love harm. Spells of protection, not seeking revenge are the answer. You always have the right to protect yourself. Build a strong psychic shield around yourself. Then visualize something happening for your enemy which will take them out of your environment or cause them to change their behavior towards you.

Ask the gods to take care of it in their own way. It's often best not to get too specific in this case about how the problem should be solved, instead be very clear about what you want e.g. "I want this harassment to stop."

On the other hand if you know that someone is doing active deliberate harm e.g. a rapist it is certainly good to do everything in your power to put a stop to his behavior. As Z. Budapest says, "Wicca is not a turn the other cheek religion, it's not cupcakism."

Witches use spells to work magic. Spells use physical representations, words, sound, color, scents, foods and visualization in various combinations. What's important in creating a spell is to use symbols that are powerful for you. It is similar to dream work in that you are reaching into the depths of yourself to draw on your ability to tap into the forces of change and use them in a creative way.

Timing can add to the power of a spell. The waxing moon is good for spells of increase, positive workings. The full moon for spells of completion, fulfillment. The waning moon for decrease, or negative work. The dark of the moon for endings or secret wisdom. Symbolism of the days of the week and time of day can also be considered.

Work spells deosil, sunwise (also called clockwise) for increase and widdershins counter-clockwise for decrease. You can work creatively with timing and direction. For example, if you're asked to do a spell for a sick friend and the only time you can get together is during the waning moon then do a spell to get rid of illness rather than to increase health.

Common spells include:

- Mojo bags: which are cloth bags containing a specific number of herbs or objects. These can be worn, carried or hung in the home, vehicle or office.
- Candles rubbed with oils and inscribed with words or symbols. These can be burned on one's altar either all at once or over a period of time.
- Talismans: pieces of paper or wood with runes, symbols and/or drawings on them. These can also be carried or burned.
- Incantations: words with the force of poetry, describing your vision for the future.

As you create your spells, see the change as being accomplished. See the end state you are working towards. Act as if it is happening and keep working to make it reality.

Tools

Your most important tool is your imagination, your ability to visualize what you want to happen, seeing the end result. Mind and body are the primary instruments of working your will. Physical tools are aids, reminders of intent or technique. For example, you carve out sacred space with an athame (knife) symbolizing separating yourself from the ordinary mundane reality of the everyday world, as you would use a knife to peel away the exterior of an orange revealing the fruit within.

Tools are very personal items. It's best if you can make your own, or find an object that speaks to you. When you purchase a tool never haggle over the price, after all think of what you'll be getting out of it. Also it's considered bad manners to touch another witch's tools without permission.

After you've acquired a tool you will want to consecrate it. Bless it with your breath for Air, pass it through a candle flame for Fire, sprinkle or wash it with Water and dip it in salt or touch to a pentacle for Earth. Speak " I consecrate you, tool of art to work my will" or words to a similar effect. Use the tool in ritual often so that it is associated in your mind with your sacred will. Soon you will find that seeing or touching your tools will aid in altering your state of mind.

Common ritual tools are:

- Athame or sword: Traditionally a double bladed black handled knife used for ritual purposes only. The handle is magnetized. Many eclectic kitchen witches use kitchen knives. Swords are useful in large public rituals where one has lots of room to work. This tool is associated with the element of Air and the male god energy. Some people have a second white handled knife called a Bolline, which is used as a working tool for cutting herbs, inscribing candles etc.
- Bowl: Used for holding water. Mixed with salt, the salt-water is used to purify objects, the ritual space and the participants. This tool is associated with the element of Water.
- Cup or chalice: Used to hold the ritual drink, the chalice represents the Goddess. Chalice and athame are often used in a symbolic reenactment of the great rite, the sacred joining of lovers. Holding the chalice below and the knife above, bring the two together until the blade enters the liquid This tool is associated with the element of Water.
- Wand: The wand is a fire tool used to direct one's will. Traditionally made of wood sacred to the White Goddess such as elderberry, willow, hazel, rowen or oak. It measured the length of the makers arm from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow. It was usually hollowed and filled with cotton or wool dripped with 3 drops of the maker's blood. Often the witches ritual name in runes is carved on it.
- Censer: Air and/or fire tool used to hold incense.
- Robes: It's nice to have special clothes for high, holy day rituals or when you feel the

need to physically put on another state of mind to give an extra boost to your work. Basic black or white tunic style robes can be accessorized with colors of the season and are easy to make or pick up in the nightwear section of a department store. Some folks work "skyclad", that's Wiccan for nude, either some or all the time. They feel that clothing inhibits their interaction with the energy flow.

- **Jewelry:** Many people have special jewelry that they wear for ritual or as talismans. Necklaces with pentacles and or crystals and other symbols of the god/dess or elements are popular. Earrings, rings and bracelets are used as well to help align and draw on the energy needed for magic.
- **Pentacle:** Often a plate or flat circle with the pentacle inscribed on or into it. Usually placed on the north altar to hold the bread. This tool is associated with Earth.
- **Cauldron:** An large iron or metal pot symbolizing transformation and associated with the center. Can be used to hold fire or water.
- **Broom:** Used to clean away or banish negative or evil influences from the ritual space. Also used in handfastings (Wiccan for wedding). Associated with water. Bell: Used to call the elements or deities. Associated with Air.
- **Book of Shadows:** A record book for rituals, spells invocations, meditations. Can be the work of an individual or a coven. Modern witches sometimes have a Disk of Shadows instead.

The Cone of Power

Building a cone of power around your desires is powerful prayer to the God/dess using the capability of your imagination. First you must be clear about what you want to accomplish. Spend some time thinking and talking about your goal. If working in a group get agreement on the intent of the magic. This is of primary importance, so take the time to talk together and build a common vision. If everyone is working towards the same object then you can build on each other's power, if not sometimes counter intents will muddy the process and it just won't work for anyone.

Stand in a circle. You can place something physical in the center to represent your intention to help focus your energy. Begin a wordless chant, concentrating your energy on your goal. If words come to you speak or sing them. Let your energy flow with those around you. Don't rush it. Let the energy build naturally in intensity and force until you reach a climax together with your heads thrown back and arms extended to the sky letting the built up energy loose into the worlds to work your will.

This can be rather noisy and is an excellent catharsis. So warn the children not to worry and if the dog begins to howl along bring its energy into the cone.

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclass6.html>

11 captures

12 May 2001 - 10 Oct 2008

May AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2005

[About this capture](#)

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition

by Cynthia Gregory

Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

7. CELEBRATIONS

Cakes and Wine

Every ritual includes a celebration of the abundance of the god/dess with a sharing of 'cakes and wine'. With the wine, which can be fruit juice, ale, milk, water, an herbal tea, or any liquid refreshment you wish to use, we speak of our gratitude for the gifts we have received in our life or in this ritual. With the cake or bread we bless each other.

At this time the great rite is often symbolized with the ritual chalice filled with wine and the athame. One person can hold the cup and another the chalice. (See previous

section under tools.)

Bless the cup and the cake. "Body of the God, Gift of the Goddess". A libation can be offered to the god/dess, if outdoors pour some wine into the earth and sprinkle some of the cake on the ground.

Take the chalice, raise it and speak your thanks. Pass it to the person on your left. When everyone is finished, take the bread or cake, break a piece off and feed it to the person on your left, speaking your blessing to them. A traditional blessing, which can be used if you don't know the person well enough or nothing comes to you, is "May you never hunger". I like better "May your hungers always be satisfied", since I think a little hunger is a good thing in life. I wouldn't want to live a life without the joy of anticipation and the heightened sense of appreciation when desire is finally fulfilled.

The Wheel of the Year

Wheel of the Year (The Holidays)

The solar year is one cycle of the sun and 13 cycles of the moon or lunar months. The Wiccan year is 364 days with one day in-between, set aside, between the worlds. That is where the term 'a year and a day' is derived. A year and a day is considered the typical length of time to undergo training, to undergo a trial marriage or otherwise to prove a commitment.

The holidays begin on the Eve and run through the day. Urban witches with corporate work schedules often celebrate on the closest weekend to the actual holiday. The most important holidays are Samhain (Halloween) and Beltane (May Day), at opposite sides of the wheel.

Samhain (Halloween) Oct. 31

The beginning and the end of the cycle, Samhain (pronounced Sow-wen) is the day between the years. It is the day to honor our dead and welcome new souls into our world. It is a crack in time, a day when the veils between the worlds are thinnest and souls can pass between the worlds and speak with each other.

On this holiday, we create altars to remember our dead, with pictures, mementos, flowers, dishes of food, beverages, candles, etc. The altars can be quite elaborate or very simple. The altar is usually placed in the west.

On this day we visit the Shining Isle and our friends, family and ancestors who've left us. It is a good time to use tools of divination and to ask for advice through dreams. This is the time when the sunchild is conceived.

Yule (Winter Solstice) Dec. 20-23

The longest night and the rebirth of the sun are celebrated at Yule, with decorated trees, Yule logs, wassail, songs, gifts and feasting. It is a time to gather loved ones, one's community and honor our chosen family.

Imbolc (Candlemas or Brigit) Feb. 2

This festival is dedicated to the goddess Brigit and is the beginning of the Celtic spring. Bridget is a triple goddess of poetry, smithcraft and healing. Venerate Brigit by sharing your creativity with your circle by telling stories, reading poems, showing your art. Make Brigit crosses with willow branches to hang in your house. This is a traditional time for initiations or starting new large projects.

Eostar (Ostara or Spring Equinox) Mar. 20-23

This is a holiday of balance. The dark and light are equal now. Spring is in full flow. Dyed eggs on the altar represent rebirth and renewal. This is a good time to plant seeds both of a magical or horticultural variety.

Beltane (May Eve-Day) May 1

May Day is the first day of Celtic summer and celebrates the fertility of the earth with maypole dances, mock battles between Summer and Winter. If you can, celebrate this holiday outdoors during the day. The Goddess and God join together in this festival.

Litha (Summer Solstice or Midsummer) June 20-23

This is the apex of the sun, the climax of the waxing god. The sun god merges with the earth goddess and begins to wane. Build bonfires in honor of the completeness and power of their union.

Lammas (Lughnasad) Aug. 1

The beginning of the harvest season and the wake of the Sun King, Lugh, are commemorated at this time. Decorate your altar with fruits of the season and corn in honor of Lugh. The mystery of the grain is usually enacted with an ear of corn passed around the circle for each to eat a few grains.

Mabon (Fall Equinox) Sept. 20-23

Another day of balance between light and dark and we continue our journey into the dark and towards the rebirth of light. Harvest nears its end. Decorate the altars with seed pods and fall fruits. Contemplate rest from the work of harvest, tools that need repair and the renewal that fallowness brings.

Samhain (Halloween) Oct. 31

And back to Halloween again. One of my favorite days. Celebrate by sharing the waters of life (good Irish whiskey or apple brandy). Make foods with pumpkins and apples. Bake soul cakes.

[top](#)

TOC
home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclass7.html>

11 captures

12 May 2001 - 10 Oct 2008

May AUG Oct

10

2001 2004 2008

About this capture

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition
by Cynthia Gregory
Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

APPENDIX: READING LIST — 2000

Adler, Margot DRAWING DOWN THE MOON, New York; Viking Press
General introduction and overview of craft and paganism in America today.

Beyerl, Paul THE MASTER BOOK OF HERBALISM, Phoenix Publishing
Excellent herbal reference with magical and healing information and extensive tables of correspondences.

Bonewits, P.I.E. REAL MAGIC, Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Co.
Magical and ritual technique. A classic.

Canan, Janine SHE RISES LIKE THE SUN, The Crossing Press
Invocations of the Goddess by Contemporary American Women Poets.

Cunningham, Scott, WICCA, A GUIDE FOR THE SOLITARY PRACTITIONER, Llewellyn Publications
Another good basic primer.

Di Prima, Diane, LOBA, Penguin Poets
Poetry to inspire.

Eisler, Riane THE CHALICE AND THE BLADE, Harper & Row
Historical look at goddess culture, how we got to patriarchy and how to move to a partnership model.

Frazer, Sir James THE NEW GOLDEN BOUGH, NY Mentor
Cultural anthropology reference on folk customs. Lots of ritual ideas.

FUNK & WAGNALLS STANDARD DICTIONARY OF FOLKLORE, MYTHOLOGY AND
LEGEND, Harper & Row
Reference of many cultures.

Gimbutas, Marija GODDESSES AND GODS OF OLD EUROPE, Harper Collins

Schlain, Leonard, THE ALPHABET VERSUS THE GODDESS, Penguin Arkana
A fascinating perspective on the effect of alphabet and image on our values and thinking as a society.

Starhawk, THE SPIRAL DANCE, Harper San Francisco
Basic primer used by many Wiccans.

Muten, Burleigh, HER WORDS An Anthology of Poetry about the Great Goddess,
Shambhala
Inspiration.

Teish, Luisah, JAMBALAYA, Harper San Francisco
African-American priestess' memoir with information on Yoruba practices.

Thorsson, Eored FUTHARK; A HANDBOOK OF RUNE MAGIC, Samuel Weiser Inc.
Norse ritual and runes.

Walker, Barbara G. THE WOMEN'S BOOK OF MYTHS AND SECRETS, Harper & Row
Feminist reference.

Wolkstein, Diane & Kramer, Samuel Noah INANNA_QUEEN OF HEAVEN AND
EARTH, Harper & Row

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/imbolc.html>

29 captures

24 Apr 2001 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Imbolc (Brigid)

by Cynthia Gregory

Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

Imbolc is the cross-quarter day marking the beginning of Celtic Spring. Imbolc means "Ewe's milk". It is the time when the cows and sheep lactate. The re-emergence of Bridget or Bride as her mother Calleach (pronounced Kali) drinks from the sacred well and is transformed into Brigid, goddess of flame. Bridget is the Celtic triple goddess of poetry, smithcraft and healing. In her honor we share poems and stories.

Colors: yellow-white-gold.

This is a time for initiation and beginnings.

Bring the usual food to share and a candle to bless for beginnings. Spend some time thinking about what you want to grow this season. Write your desire on a piece of white or yellow paper and wrap it around your candle. Fasten it with a bit of string. Bring this candle with you.

Also bring with you stories, poems, pictures, wings and other creative examples of smithcraft to share during the feasting.

A cauldron of water is in the center with a candle centered in it. Brighid Bread is prepared. And a chalice of milk stands ready.

Cast circle and invoke the elements emphasizing:

Air- birth of Bridget, poetry

Fire- smithy's forge
Water- well of healing
Earth-mother of regeneration

Statement of Purpose:

The Mother's breasts are full with milk, nourishing us as we grow with the light.
The spring is dawning, the work begins.
It is time to sow our seeds.
We light tonight the new fire, the flame of Bridget, the fire of Bride.
Come Bridget, be our guide.

Invoke the Goddess Bridget

Bridget of the forge-fire
Bridget of the healing well,
Bridget of the rhyming word,
Come, weave your spell.
Weave your spell of healing
Around our bodies
Weave your spell of healing
Around our souls.
With you we weave healing
Around our earth.

Light the center candle.

Invoke the God:

We call the Green Man, wild and free.
Rise up from Mother Earth,
Reborn the lover, father, son,
Cernunnos, fill us with your mirth.

Each person takes their candle and individually places it in the center speaking their desire.

Raise energy with a spiral dance (Fire of Freedom Chant -- Starhawk)

"We can rise with the fire of freedom,
truth is a fire that burns our chains
and we can stop the fire of destruction,
healing is a fire running thru our veins."

The Priestess holds the cup. The Priest blesses it with athame saying:

"Sweet mother's milk feed our spirits gently as a new born babe."

Pass the cup.

The priest holds the plate with Bridget Cake. The Priestess takes the bread, breaks it saying:

"In fertile darkness life grows to birth,..."
Bless with bread.

Feast, share our creativity.

Devote and open circle.

Blessed Be, Cynthia Gregory

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclasstoc.html>

34 captures

22 Apr 2001 - 27 May 2010

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition
by Cynthia Gregory
Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

[Table of Contents](#)

1. Class Information
 2. The Spiral Path
 3. Grounding and The Circle
 4. Elements
 5. The Goddess
 6. The God
 7. Working Magic
 8. Celebrations
 9. Appendix
- Imbolc/Brigid

1. CLASS INFORMATION

Class Format: 3 class series

Curriculum:

1. Casting the Circle and the Elements: How To Begin
2. The Goddess: and God. The God: Paradox Of The Untamable And The Sacrifice
3. Working Magic: Creating Change

Class will be experiential and in ritual format. You get more out of the class if you actively participate. There will be opportunities to lead invocations and other parts of the ritual as the class progresses. You won't be pushed (well, maybe gently). When you feel ready, please volunteer, or be willing to stretch your spiritual muscles and take a risk. Using ritual, we will cover the practice of grounding and purification; the elements and casting a circle, divinity in female and male aspects, and working magic. Plan to attend all sessions and call if unable to show up.

2. THE SPIRAL PATH

Wicca is an earth-based religion with a humanist bent, based on the immanence of the sacred within all. It is polytheistic and inclusive, with both male and female deities. Wicca is a practice rather than a dogma.

Wiccan is a religion of doing. It is practical. If it works do it. What witches¹ do is ritual and magic. The rituals vary with the seasons, the needs and the creativity of the participants. Some rituals draw on old traditions and are celebrations of the interplay of earth and sun. Some are new, designed to meet immediate needs. They can be completely spontaneous and or planned in detail. The purpose is to connect our energy with that of the worlds and to create change in our lives and the environment we live in. We call that magic, others may call it prayer.

The practice of Wicca generally done as individuals or in small groups. Thus it is highly individualistic, creative and flexible. There is very little in the way of creed and no national, universally accepted hierarchy. There are a variety of flavors from those who recreate the feel of Celtic Druids, those who worship Goddesses only, faeries, the

eclectic traditions and everything in between. Some use a very disciplined approach, others a more playful. The freedom to create what serves your needs is openly acknowledged and valued in this religion.

Wicca is a religion of engagement. Instead of looking to transcend our human existence, we embrace our humanity. Our bodies and imaginations are our primary tools for working magic. Because our bodies are the manifestation of the earth, the spirit is not valued over the body. As the Goddess says, " All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals."

As an earth based practice, Wicca is a way of interacting with the world, of acknowledging the cycles of the seasons; of light and dark; of birth and death. Wicca confirms the significance of these cycles in our lives. The goal is over time to achieve balance with the forces of nature. We flow with the natural processes of creation and decay.

The planting of spring brings the growth of summer. The harvest that follows is the death and sacrifice of grain to the continuing force of life. The fallowness of winter is a time of rest within the dark season that prepares us for the renewal and work of spring.

Without death there is no renewal, no room for new life. Without accepting pain, anger and fear as a natural part of life, joy is shallow and has no root. All emotions have reasons for being and to deny the power of any is to lose the lessons they can teach us. It is right to be angry at injustice. It is wise to fear what can harm us and to protect ourselves. It is important to pay attention to pain and to look for its root causes.

Often the lessons of the dark are avoided. We even use the term enlightenment to mean wisdom. Through Wicca we seek a deeper wisdom. Wisdom that has learned the value of endarkenment. The wisdom gained through the courage of looking inward, into our heart and our soul. Underground , in the decay of the grave, we find the power of transformation that is rooted in destruction, when that which is dead nourishes the young seedling. Death releases our prior form and energy so a new elemental form can emerge. This is the power of renewal, germination and rebirth. The Goddess is both dark and light.

The Goddess is balanced by the God as the earth is balanced by the sun. The God leads us into the untamed wildness within us. That primeval part of ourselves that resonates with the stag, master of his forest home. His power is charged with sexual energy, fertile and potent. Not only is he untamed but he cannot be tamed. The paradox of the God is that he is both the wild horned one and the willing sacrifice to the life force. His sacrifice is symbolized by his Corn God aspect. He is the mystery of the grain, which must be cut down to sustain life as sacred bread.

The God and Goddess, like earth and sun, are in motion relative to each other. Not static but ever changing as the light and warmth we feel changes while the earth tips her face to the sun. This relationship is celebrated in the seasonal holidays of solstices,

equinoxes and cross-quarter days.

A spiral represents our path through life. As we move from birth to death, passing through the seasons many times, celebrating the holidays, we are different each time we experience them. We grow in body and wisdom from our beginning and feel our waning as we move into old age. Wicca is a tool for harmonizing with the natural elements, the cycles and the male/female energies both within and outside ourselves. Wicca is a way of accepting the natural ebb and flow we all experience and wisely working with it to accomplish our goals.

Basic Ritual Format

Preparation: Ground and purify participants

Cast the Circle: Create sacred space.

Invoke the elements.

East: Air

South: Fire

West: Water

North: Earth

Invoke the Goddess (Triple)

Invoke the God (Horned)

Magical Work: Cone of Power; Spiral Dance

Feast: Bread (Cakes) and Wine.

Devoke and Close.

1 I use the word witch in spite of the connotations to connect with the spirit of those who suffered for the Goddess during the Inquisition.

[top](#)

[TOC](#)

[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/beltaine.html>

34 captures

24 Apr 2001 - 22 May 2010

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Happy Beltane (May Day)

by Cynthia Gregory

Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

"Summer is a-coming in."

Beltane Cake

This is a Scottish Beltane custom. A knobby cake made with oats or barley, milk and eggs is baked in a round shape. The group stands in a circle facing the Bel fire. As they pass the cake each breaks off a knob or piece and throws it over their shoulder saying "This I give to thee _____ (naming an elemental spirit of preservation or destruction). Preserve my _____." An example from the old days is "This I give to thee O Fox Preserve my chickens." Today one might say, "This I give to you economy. Preserve my bank account." Here are a couple of versions of Beltane cake, based on oats, milk and eggs. I have successfully substituted Rice Dream and soy margarine for a dairy-free version. Also since Beltane is a festival of Belenus a Sun God, and a celebration of the rites of love, I use cinnamon, ginger and cloves.

Cinnamon is associated with the Sun and has long been used in love spells. Cloves are also popular in love spells. Ginger is associated with the Moon and has been used to win the affection of women. Thus as the Goddess and God come together at Beltane, so the Sun and Moon are joined in the cake.

Beltane Cake I

In a saucepan, heat 1 1/2 cups of milk with 1-cup oats, 1/2 cup butter and 1/2 tsp. sea salt. Cook until thickened. Let stand until room temperature. Mix in 2 cups brown sugar, 2 eggs and 1 tsp. vanilla. Add 1 1/3 cup unbleached white flour, 1 tsp. baking soda, tsp. Cinnamon, 1/4 tsp. Ginger and 1/2 tsp. cloves. Bake in a well-greased 9X13 pan at 350 degrees for 30 minutes or until a wooden toothpick inserted in center comes up clean. Top of cake may be decorated with powdered sugar. This cake is even better if baked the day before it is eaten. After cooling to room temperature cover tightly until serving.

Beltane Cake II

Heat oven to 350 degrees. In a 9" round skillet melt 1/2 cup butter. Mix in a bowl 2/3 cup

oats, 1 cup flour, 1 tbs. sugar, 1/2 tsp. ginger, 1/2 tsp. cinnamon, 1/2 tsp. cloves, 1/2 tsp. salt and 1/2 tsp. baking powder. Stir 2/3 cup molasses into the butter and add to the flour mixture alternately with 2/3 cup milk. Do not overmix. Bake for approximately 35 minutes until it pulls away from the edge of the pan.

top
TOC
home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/belgallery.html>

28 captures

9 Aug 2001 - 19 Jun 2010

Jun AUG Dec

07

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Beltaine With the Toads

text and pix by Valerie Walker

(Sorry, but this page may take a looooong time to load. Hope you think it's worth your patience.)

May 6, 2001: okay, it was a week late for Beltaine, but it was a beautiful sunny day in the Bay Area, and we were all in festive spirits. Ron and I picked up Maura, and we were the first carload to arrive. Artemis had declared herself May Fool, and dressed the part.

three Graces

Here are the Three Graces, Artemis, Maura, and Cynthia

After a climb up the hill, we came to the ritual place and set up the directional altars and began to make wreaths for everyone. Tracey took us through a rehearsal of "The Lusty Month of May," but it soon became obvious that we were hopeless as a chorus. "Let's just wing it!" someone suggested, and, since we're the Winged Toads, that sounded like a plan. Accordingly, we called the directions and invoked Gaia and Priapus as appropriate deities.

(Directional priestesses have been altered to please the Muse of PhotoShop--vw)

After a turn around the Maypole (which was supported by Robert) it was time for Cakes and Wine: Beltaine Cake and champagne courtesy of Cynthia, garlic eggplant and pasta salad by Ron, Robert's elixir (wow), and other goodies including chocolate eggs, among many other wonderful things.

About this point, words fail me. Here's what it felt like:

top
TOC
home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/belgallery02.html>

29 captures

7 Jul 2002 - 19 Jun 2010

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Beltaine With the Toads, mark 2

pix taken by Monica, tweaked by Valerie

(Sorry, but this page may take a loooooong time to load. Hope you think it's worth your patience.)

May 4, 2002: cold and gloomy at Sutro Heights Park, but spirits were high, as you can tell from the following pix: cynthia

maura

tracey

artemis

ron

serious

me again

toads

and, last but hardly least:

the maypole

top

TOC

home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/imbolc.html>

29 captures

24 Apr 2001 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Imbolc (Brigid)

by Cynthia Gregory

Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

Imbolc is the cross-quarter day marking the beginning of Celtic Spring. Imbolc means

"Ewe's milk". It is the time when the cows and sheep lactate. The re-emergence of Bridget or Bride as her mother Calleach (pronounced Kali) drinks from the sacred well and is transformed into Brigid, goddess of flame. Bridget is the Celtic triple goddess of poetry, smithcraft and healing. In her honor we share poems and stories.

Colors: yellow-white-gold.

This is a time for initiation and beginnings.

Bring the usual food to share and a candle to bless for beginnings. Spend some time thinking about what you want to grow this season. Write your desire on a piece of white or yellow paper and wrap it around your candle. Fasten it with a bit of string. Bring this candle with you.

Also bring with you stories, poems, pictures, wings and other creative examples of smithcraft to share during the feasting.

A cauldron of water is in the center with a candle centered in it. Brigid Bread is prepared. And a chalice of milk stands ready.

Cast circle and invoke the elements emphasizing:

Air- birth of Bridget, poetry

Fire- smithy's forge

Water- well of healing

Earth-mother of regeneration

Statement of Purpose:

The Mother's breasts are full with milk, nourishing us as we grow with the light.

The spring is dawning, the work begins.

It is time to sow our seeds.

We light tonight the new fire, the flame of Bridget, the fire of Bride.

Come Bridget, be our guide.

Invoke the Goddess Bridget

Bridget of the forge-fire

Bridget of the healing well,

Bridget of the rhyming word,

Come, weave your spell.

Weave your spell of healing

Around our bodies

Weave your spell of healing

Around our souls.

With you we weave healing

Around our earth.

Light the center candle.

Invoke the God:

We call the Green Man, wild and free.
Rise up from Mother Earth,
Reborn the lover, father, son,
Cernunnos, fill us with your mirth.

Each person takes their candle and individually places it in the center speaking their desire.

Raise energy with a spiral dance (Fire of Freedom Chant -- Starhawk)

"We can rise with the fire of freedom,
truth is a fire that burns our chains
and we can stop the fire of destruction,
healing is a fire running thru our veins."

The Priestess holds the cup. The Priest blesses it with athame saying:

"Sweet mother's milk feed our spirits gently as a new born babe."

Pass the cup.

The priest holds the plate with Bridget Cake. The Priestess takes the bread, breaks it saying:

"In fertile darkness life grows to birth,..."

Bless with bread.

Feast, share our creativity.

Devoke and open circle.

Blessed Be, Cynthia Gregory

[top](#)

[TOC](#)

[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/imbolc03.html>

22 captures

6 May 2003 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

click on thumbnail to see full-size picture

Thursday: East altar
(Valerie)

South altar
(Cynthia)

West altar
(Maura)

North altar
(Tracey)

The first evening:
calling the South

Friday morning:
Maura cooks

Tracey

Friday night:
Artemis

Artemis and Cynthia

Saturday morning:
Jim with coffee

Artemis in the kitchen

The Great Dyeing Project: we dye altar cloths under the direction of Tracey and Cynthia. Here's Jim working on one.

Valerie gets ready: wrapping the cloth around the tube and binding it with string

Ron immerses himself

Artemis, Ron, and some of the results in the foreground

Gail

Saturday afternoon:
the beach

Toads on the beach

Gail and Ron

Maura prepares mentally for her workshop and ritual

Saturday night: Jim

Sunday morning: lack of sleep catches up with Tracey

Imbolc 2003

by Valerie and Ron

The Toads rented a house on Bodega Bay for the Imbolc weekend, and it was wall-to-wall rituals from start to finish. Here's the program :

Thursday: Ron, Valerie, Maura, Cynthia & Tracey arrive, build altars. Maura: West; Cynthia: South; Valerie: East, Tracey: north. (Cynthia and Valerie deliberately picked directions they aren't used to working in.)

Friday: general laying about till late afternoon /early evening. Thrift-store run to get more altar cloths in Petaluma. Valerie leads a Feri workshop and ritual. Dinner by Ron.

Artemis and Jim arrive 10 pm. Artemis leads us all in telling our personal myth around the fireplace.

New Moon is at 2:28 AM Sat morning, so before crashing Jim helps us acknowledge the dark of the moon in a brief ritual (which does not involve releasing helium balloons).

Saturday: Maura cooks breakfast. Gail arrives.

Tracey and Cynthia provide the altar cloth dyeing workshop mid morning.

Beach walk after lunch during which we collect shells and such for Maura's workshop.

Imbolc ritual begins with a kitchen-magick workshop by Maura in the late afternoon and flows into the ritual and dinner. Dinner is stone soup (everyone brings a vegetable to add. Prepping the vegetable and adding to the soup is part of the ritual.)

Sunday morning Artemis and Cynthia cook breakfast. Devote and bid the gods farewell.

Take down altars, divide leftover food, pack. Checkout is at noon, and we just make it.

Ron's Imbolc Ritual

Hi y'all. Here's a personal ritual that you can do when you arrive at the house for Imbolc. It will help get you ready by helping you to focus on your intent, and it's a house blessing as well. Also included is a formal house blessing and cleansing ritual for all who arrive on Thursday evening.

Imbolc, the threshold between winter and spring. It's the time of year we look for the first Crocus and Snowdrops to appear. It's the time of naissance and new beginning; the time when seeds get fat and swell, but before they sprout. It feels incredibly creative to me. Infinite possibility.

Being an urban witch doesn't mean I'm out of touch with the seasons. I can feel the days getting longer, but this year it's more in my bones than in my head. It's only mid January, yet my Camellia has put out a huge bunch of new buds, the first of which have already bloomed. And the early tulips are already popping out of the ground, some leaves almost a foot high! It's too damned early in the year for my head to get around this popping up and growing and stuff. But my body knows it has been a warm winter this year, and so it's perfectly natural to want to swell up a bit and strut your stuff, and to be joyous and hopeful, and to spread your shoulders and puff out your chest and say, "Yeah! Isn't life grand!"

...just hope a late frost doesn't settle in. Better prepare for it if it does...

All of the above is my intent for the weekend...

What to bring with you to cleanse and bless the house:

Being that this is the season of new beginnings, replete with all our hopes and fears and such, bring a magical cleansing tool or implement of your choice to the Imbolc weekend, in order to ritually clean our retreat. It could be a dusting rag, a broom or a mop. Maybe it's a wand, or an athame, or a rock. Or maybe it's a musical instrument, a dance, a song or a poem. Whatever -- you know what will make ritual space clean for you. Also bring a candle, which you will not burn this weekend, but will bless it and imbue it with good vibes, and then light it some other time when needed.

During the drive to the house take some time to meditate on your intent for this Imbolc weekend. Include in your meditation how best to cleanse and bless our residence. Distill

it into a single declamatory statement. When you arrive do some variant of the following ritual:

Leave everything in your car except your ritual cleaning tool. As you cross the threshold of the house, light a candle (there will be candles and matches by the front door), use your tool to bless the house, and then state your intent; state it either loudly for all to hear or under your breath, being respectful of others, depending on time and circumstance. The object is to charge this magical space with your full intent when you enter the house.

The Thursday evening house blessing ritual, for the folks who are there:

The purpose of this ritual will be to cleanse the house and to dedicate it as a temple to Brigit.

When you arrive, cross the threshold, as described above, and then take some time to ground yourself, concentrating on the house and the moment. Feel in your body this ritual space. After grounding, let yourself be led into the house, according to your intent, to some place to be cleansed. Just trust your body to lead you there.

Spend whatever time you need to clean this place, using your tools at hand.

When you have finished your house cleansing, join with the rest of the coven to resume the ritual. As coven members gather after their personal cleansing ritual, respect the later arrivals and try to keep noise levels low while they perform their ritual. During this time chose a place for your altar, in some central location in the house, and then assemble it. Cynthia has sent the details of which person and direction. I'll distribute candelarias throughout the house.

After all have gathered and built their altars we will turn out all the lights, leave the house by a back door, and then assemble by the front door of the house. When you come to the front entrance of the house take a white candle in hand from the selection at the door.

Valerie will asperge us, and then I will offer Brigid's flame to light your candle before you cross the threshold, bringing her light into the house, according to your will. We'll assemble inside the door, and then proceed through the house, visiting each room and lighting candelarias as we go, while singing:

The darkness of winter and grave
Is the womb from which we are born.
Praise Brigit, and welcome She
Who bears us into light and life!

[I was looking for a simple quatrain that we can easily memorize and chant while we move through the house. I found a NROOGD Imbolc ritual online, borrowed a bit from

here and there, and managed to appropriate the refrain.

It contains most everything we want in an Imbolc house blessing: it invokes Brigit, and it evokes mystery of the change from darkness to light, death to rebirth.]

After filling the house with light we will assemble in the place where the altars were made, and then call the quarters. We'll invoke Brigit, and then the Green God, keeping in mind that we are asking them to stay with us for the entire weekend.

Create a cone of power, concentrating on naissance and beginning, of the cusp of the year between the dark and light, and of the power of growth. Let the light we create in the house magnify and explode into the multiverse, and then descend around our house and be with us for the weekend. Let the neighbors talk about this event for years to come.

We'll have a light cakes and wine, but we'll not devoke until after breakfast on Sunday morning when we leave the house, we'll just thank them for joining us.

top
TOC
home

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/elvis.html>

21 captures

20 Jan 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

The Lesser Elvis Banishing Ritual of the Sequined Pentagram
channeled by Robert under the influence of the Internet

NOTE: This ritual was dictated to me whilst scrying into the black, shiny part of an Elvis record.

The purpose of this ritual is to clear the area of all Elvis-negative influences. This includes all that not patriotic and all that is not of White Trash at heart.

Begin by facing in the direction of Graceland. For easy reference, we shall call this East.

1: Visualize the infinitely bright light of a Las Vegas spotlight descending upon you.

2: Draw this Holy Light into your head, intoning: LOVE ME

3: Point downward, hand over... personal privates... , intoning: TENDER

4: Point to right shoulder. LOVE ME

5: Point to left shoulder. TRUE

This is the Holy Cross of Elvis. Conclude by saying: "Uh-huh".

6: Facing East (Graceland), draw a bright, blue, sequined pentagram in the air. Be sure to visualize the light reflecting off of the shimmering sequins. Intone: Ehhhh

7: Repeat step six to the south. Intone: Llll

8: To the west, intone: Vihhhhh

9: To the north, intone: ssssss

Between each of the above steps, you should make part of a circle connecting each pentagram. This circle should be made of the Light of the Holy Las Vegas Spotlight.

Imagine yourself bathed in the Holy Vegas Light. Face Graceland.

10: Before you, imagine Elvis as a baby, containing his True Elvis Potential. This is the Elvis of Air.

Say: ELVIS, thou who were born a King in Lowly Surroundings. Fulfill your potential. Be present with me today.

11: Behind you, imagine the young man Elvis, on the brink of Stardom. This is the Elvis of Water.

Say: ELVIS, thou who art about to realize your Kingliness among men. Fulfill that Potential. Be with me today.

12: To your right, imagine Elvis in the prime of his career, when he was making movies and the like. He thrusts his pelvis suggestively. This is the Elvis of Fire.

Say: ELVIS, thou who art leading us to Light. Be with me today.

13: To your left, imagine Elvis in his Las Vegas stage. He wears sunglasses and is

slightly pudgy. This is the Elvis of Earth.

Say: ELVIS, thou who didst die on the pot of an overdose. Be with me today.

Repeat the Holy Cross of Elvis. Thus ends the Ritual.

This ritual should be repeated daily. If you wish, you may use Elvis music in the background to aid your concentration. If you have an altar, it should contain a Microphone Wand, a Microphone-Stand Dagger, an Elvis "45 Disc, and small porcelain toilet (Chalice).

May the Holy Light of Las Vegas Shine within you.

Love is the Law. Love under Rock & Roll.

top
TOC
home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/litha.html>

24 captures

11 Jul 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Dec

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Midsummer Ritual (Litha)

Cynthia

Prior to the ritual meditate on the transformation you need. Write it on paper and wrap around a stick. Bring this with you.

Gather and ground while building altars (all bring flowers, apples and summer fruits to decorate)

Cast circle:

Asperge with sea water and lavender[Name]..(your name here)
Cense with frankincense[Name]..
Draw with athame[Name]..

Statement of Purpose

We celebrate midsummer with ancient and mystic rites. On this longest day all nature is filled with pulsating energy and goddess and god passionately join. We bath in their warmth and light. Now is the time for releasing past cares and banes. Now is the time to purify in the transformative fire of the sun. We open the door of turning and returning, the door ruled by Dag the rune of opening. Admitting through the door that which we need to transform ourselves. On this longest day we open the door that separates us from our desire. We welcome joy.

Invoke the Goddess as Aphrodite

(To Aphrodite of the Flowers at Knossos, adapted from Sappho -612 BCE)

Come to the holy temple of the virgins
Where a pleasant grove of apple trees
Circles and altar smoking with frankincense
The roses leave shadow on the ground
And cool springs mummer through apple branches
Where shuddering leaves pour down profound sleep. In that meadow where horses
have grown
Glossy, and all spring flowers grow wild,
The anise shoots fill the air with aroma.
And there our queen Aphrodite pours
Celestial nectar in our gold cups,
Which she fills gracefully with sudden joy.
(Chant until she's here.)

Invoke the God as Apollo

(Adapted from Rainer Maria Rilke, Adriatic Torso of Apollo)

Apollo whose eyes are like ripening fruit,
Whose chest is suffused with brilliance from inside.
You, who gleam with power and dazzle our eyes.
From your dark center where procreation flares
Burst forth like a flare.
Here there is no heart that does not feel you.
We must change our lives.
(Chant until he's here.)

Raise cone of power around center fire and at apex toss the sticks into the fire.
Cakes and wine. (BBQ)

Devoke and open circle.

top
TOC
home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/kicker.html>

26 captures

11 Jul 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Dec

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Crossing the Bridge

a cyber-ritual for Kicker the dog

by Jim, adapted from Ray Buckland

I am writing this through a veil of tears and with a grief-stricken heart. Kicker suffered a stroke last night and had lost most function of her hind legs and partial control of her bladder. She had a preexisting paralyzed larynx that inhibited her breathing. I had her euthanized at 11:20 p. m., Wednesday February 21, 2001.

READ/HEAR: The flute is played for Kicker. (A long, single, low vibrato note is played)

SAY/THINK: So be it.

READ/HEAR: That today Kicker is not with us, here on this earthly plane, saddens us all. Yet let us not give in to sadness. For is this not a sign that she has fulfilled her life's work? Now she is free to move, free to cross the river Styx and await the thinness of the veils at Samhain. Fear this not, for we shall meet again, as surely as the moon cycles and the tides change. And that will be a time devoted to great joy and celebration. Let us send forth our good wishes to precede her across the bridge.

THINK: From your third eye see a Loving black lab looking at you from your monitor. Reach into your being and draw up your Love, joy, happiness & magick and release it through your eyes into the image your third eye sees on the screen.

READ/HEAR: We wish you all the Love and happiness we may. You shall never be

forgotten. In kind, let us not be forgotten. Whenever we meet in ritual, you are always welcome.

SAY/THINK: So mote it be.

top
TOC
home

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/choir.html>

28 captures

9 Aug 2001 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Pagan in the Choir
By Jim "Goatroper" Poket
Dedicated to Maura Sipila

There's a Pagan in the choir.
Her voice is sweet and true.
There's a Pagan in the choir.
What will the Christians do?

There's a Pagan in the choir,
who sings from her own soul.
There's a Pagan in the choir,
that the Church can not control.

There's a Pagan in the choir,
with a voice as sweet as rain.
There's a Pagan in the choir,
whose magick will remain.

There's a Pagan in the choir,
who sees beyond the name.
There's a Pagan in the choir,
who knows the message is the same.

There's a Pagan in the choir,
that through music shares her Love.
There's a Pagan in the choir,
who knows the power up above.

There's a Pagan in the choir,
who sings with Christians at her side.
There's a Pagan in the choir,
who knows the Goddess is inside.

There's a Pagan in the Choir,
that these differences disdains.
There's a Pagan in the choir,
that sings till Love alone remains.

© May 25, 2001 All rights reserved

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/wait.html>

23 captures

10 May 2003 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

The Ritual and the Wait
By Jim "Goatroper" Poket
Dedicated, with Love, to Miranda
Merry meet and merry part and merry meet again

The altar still is standing from the ritual held last night.
He had hoped to help her passing, to guide her soul in flight.

The pentacle is littered with the crumbs of ritual bread.
The candle was extinguished when he retired to his bed.

The mortar and the pestle with pure salt are englazed.
The ritual bowl holds offerings for the Lord & Lady raised.

The Athame lays unsheathed, its power is exposed.
Her picture is presented, by his cord it is enclosed.

The incense is but a cinder; its aroma's left the air.
The water crystal's empty with salt its contents pair.

The chalice is now empty; the wine has run its course.
The ritual now is over, and he waits without remorse.

© July 7, 2002 All rights reserved

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/lammas.html>

26 captures

11 Jul 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Dec

06

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

Lammas (August Eve) Feast of Bread

by Cynthia and other Winged Toads

AKA Lughnasadh, The Games of Lugh, Celtic god of reincarnation. Lugh initiated the festival in honor of the earth-mother Tailtiu. This is the beginning of fall and the harvest, when the god is cut down as the corn in the fields, sacrificing himself to life. He is the seed, planted in the body of the goddess to rise again as the new crop. This is the time of reaping, of gathering in the harvest of our labors.

Meet at the gate at noon. Bring symbols of the harvest to decorate the altars, and the usual food to share, sit upons, water toys, and whatever you need to feel comfortable for the day.

(Otis and Cynthia will prepare the grove before we begin.)

Ground with salt water under the Oaks.

Cynthia (with athame) will lead procession with meditative chant to the Grove.

"Bringing in the Sheaves"

Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness, sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve:

Now begins the harvest and the time of reaping, we shall come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves.

Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, we shall come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves.

Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, we shall come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves.

(Repeat chorus)

Enter grove one by one as Jim anoints with oil.

Circle the Grove with athame, salt water and incense, spiraling in as we cast circle.

'Athame draw the circle round about, magic/power stay in world stay out.'

'Salt and sea of ill stay free.'

'Fire and air draw all that's fair.'

Pass athame to Valerie to invoke the East/Air. Robin: South/Fire. Otis: West/Water.

Scott: North/Earth. And return to the East completing the circle.

'The circle is cast, the ritual is begun, what is between the worlds, concerns not the worlds, yet will change the worlds.'

Invocation to Tailtiu - Sally

Invocation to Lugh - Cynthia

'Oh tell me why, Oh tell me why, tell me why must the clouds come to darken the sky?'

'Oh tell me why, Oh tell me why, tell me why must the clouds come to darken the sky?'
'This is the wake of Lug, the Sun King. He lost his life on the solstice day.'
'This is the wake of Lug, the Sun King. He steps into the dark and guides our way.'

Lammas Response Chant - Cynthia and Otis

Otis: What is this day?

All: It is the day of Lammas.

Cynthia: What is the meaning of this day?

All: It is the mystery of the corn

Otis: What is the mystery of the corn?

All: That which is cut down will rise again.

Cynthia: Who will rise again?

All: We will rise again.

Otis: Who will rise again?

All: We will rise again.

Cynthia: Who will rise again?

All: We will rise again.

Raise cone of power around corn in center. Give energy to the seed and the fruit.

Corn Blessing - Robin

'Behold the mystery...'

Bread Blessing of Each Other - Jim

Wine - Toasts of Gratitude - Cynthia

Devoke and open circle.

"Happy Trails."

Descend to the pond.

[top](#)

[TOC](#)

[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/hallows.html>

24 captures

27 Jan 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

Samhain Ritual

Cynthia and other Toads

Assemble in kitchen. Guide and Ps. bring food into sacred space. Review ritual with participants.

Salt Water Grounding

Asperge at entrance to hall.

Come down hall passing through the veils, one by one as called to face Challenger.

[First called drums softly once in circle.]

Cross river Styx [Guide helps each one across.]

Guide to west altar to place mementos of departed.

On east altar place welcome new life items.

All sit in silence around center cauldron until all have entered and are seated.

Statement Of Purpose:

This is the night when the veil is thin that divides the worlds.

It is the new year in the time of the year's death,

When the harvest is gathered and the fields lie fallow.

Tonight the King of the Waning Year sails over the sunless sea, the womb of the Mother.

He steps ashore on the Shining Isle, the luminous world egg, becoming the seed of His own rebirth.

The gates of life and death are open; the Sun Child is conceived;

The dead walk, and to the living is revealed the Mystery;

That every ending is a beginning.

We meet in the time out of time, everywhere and nowhere, here and there,

To greet the Lord of Death who is the Lord of Life

And the Triple Goddess, who is the Circle of Rebirth.

Invocations:

Invoke Directional Elements.

Invoke God with Chant: "Hoof and Horn"

Poem "Samhain" by John Montague

Sing a song

for the mistress

of the bones.

The player

on the black keys
the darker harmonies

light jig
of shoe buckles
on a coffin lid.

pale glint
of the wrecker's lantern
on a jagged cliff

across the ceaseless
glitter of the spume
a seagull's creak

the damp-haired
seaweed stained sorceress
marshlight of defeat

chill of winter
a slowly failing fire
faltering desire

Darkness of Darkness
we meet on our way.

Invoke Goddess with Chant: "Old Crone of Mystery"

Sailing to the Blessed Isle Ps. faces western altar.
Guide takes participants one at a time and forms a "boat"[triangle] behind Ps. (the prow)
with hand on shoulder of person in front, giving each person a phrase to chant as we
travel over the sunless sea to the Blessed Isle. [to the shining isle, over the sunless sea,
in the silver ship, in the realm of the dark, sailing west etc.] Continue chant until we
reach the shore.

Remembrance Of The Departed

Ps. opens the urn releasing the spirits.

"This we do in remembrance. There is no end to the circle"

Each in turn lights a black candle from the lit black candle on the west altar and speaks
of departed.

Chant: "There Is No End To The Circle"

Welcome New Life.

Each in turn lights a white candle from the lit yellow candle on the east altar and speaks
of new life joining us this year.

Light the center cauldron as we bring in changes for ourselves for the new year.

Chant: "She Changes Everything"

The Mystery of the Fruit of Death and Life. Take an apple and a pomegranate from the west altar;

Show the pomegranate and say: "Behold the fruit of life, which is death."

Plunge the athame into the fruit, breaking it apart.

"Taste the seeds of death."

Pass the fruit around for all to eat.

Show the apple and say: "Behold the fruit of death, which is life."

Slice the apple in half crossways and show the interior to the celebrants.

"Behold the five-pointed star"

"Taste the fruit of life."

Pass the fruit around for all to eat.

Cakes and Cup.

Pass the cup containing Waters of Life. Toast the spirits of those who have joined us.

Bless each other with Soul Cakes.

Feast

Devocations.

Bid farewell to the spirits.

Devoke the God and Goddess.

Devoke the Elements.

Open the circle.

"Merry, meet and merry part and merry meet again."

"Blessed Be."

[top](#)

[TOC](#)

[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/yule01.html>

23 captures

1 Jul 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

Yule with the Toads
pix taken & tweaked by valerie,
recipes by Ron Miller
stories courtesy of Maura

Maura psyching herself for a day in the kitchen

the geese

the Chef carves

Willow, Tom, and Ron take a little liquid refreshment

Cynthia & Hal

Gail, Artemis, & the Prime Mover of the Universe

one side of the table

the other side of the table

Tracey parties hearty

your hostess and dishwasher

Otis in full cry

...and to all a goooooood niight

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

The Recipes:

[Gravlax](#)

[Mushroom timbales](#)

[How to roast a goose / Poultry brine](#)

[Xmas Pudding](#)

[Yule stories](#)

HOW THE SALMON CAME TO THE YUOK PEOPLE

A Native American Folk Tale

Coyote stood by the Klamath River one day, and thought to himself, "My people, the Yuok have no food. I wonder if I could find some in that mighty river. There must be something there. There ought to be fish in rivers. Where are all the fish?"

Coyote talks this over with his best friend, Mink. Mink said, "All the fish are up in the pond behind Salmon Grandmother's house. She's keeping them all for herself!"

"Well, then, I'll just have to journey up the river to free the fish!" said Coyote, although he knew it was a long trip to Salmon Grandmother's house. Coyote's grandchild, Wren, gave him a pouch of madrone berries for the trip, which are small and red, and look exactly like salmon's eggs!

Coyote began the long journey up to Salmon Grandmother's house. When he got there, he knocked on her door. "Who is it?" called Salmon Grandmother. Coyote replied, "I'm just a weary traveler, and I'm oh, so hungry and tired! I need a place to stay for the night." Of course, Salmon Grandmother took pity and asked him inside. She offered him some of her fresh, hot acorn soup, but just as she was getting ready to dish it up, Coyote popped a madrone berry into his mouth. Grandmother was rather surprised.

"Would you like some Salmon eggs?" Coyote offered. Grandmother thought, "Oh dear! This Coyote fellow knows about my salmon!" This worried her, because the salmon were her secret and she didn't want to share. But since he clearly already knew about the salmon, she couldn't offend him by just giving him acorn soup. So she picked up her dip net and went out to the pond in back. She dipped her net in the water, and pulled out a fine, fat silver salmon. Then she cooked it up on skewers over a pit of coals and they had a delicious dinner.

After the meal, Grandmother told Coyote he was welcome to rest and stay overnight. Making himself comfortable, Coyote announced he would be going out the sweat lodge. He brought his magic flute with him into the lodge. Coyote started to play a lovely little tune on his flute. He played and played, and when Grandmother heard the sweet strains

of beautiful music she became drowsy. Finally, she finally fell into a deep sleep. Once she drifted off, Coyote left his flute playing in the sweat lodge, since of course it was a magic flute that could play by itself. He went out to the salmon pond in back, and began to dig. He dug and dug all night, forming a trench from the pond to the nearby river. Towards dawn, Grandmother woke up and heard the flute still playing. "Something is not right here! Who can play the flute for that long?" Suddenly it hits her.

"My salmon," she shouted, "He's stealing my salmon!!!" She jumped out of bed, and raced around to the back of the house. She got there just in time to see Coyote digging out the last little patch of dirt between the pond and the river. Coyote lopes down the riverbank, laughing as all of her salmon swim free into the Klamath. And that's how the salmon came to the Klamath river to feed the Yurok!

The Shortest Day
by Susan Cooper

And so the Shortest Day came and the year died
And everywhere down the centuries of the snow-white world
Came people singing, dancing,
To drive the dark away.
They lighted candles in the winter trees;
They hung their homes with evergreen;
They burned beseeching fires all night long
To keep the year alive.
And when the new year's sunshine blazed awake
They shouted, revelling.
Through all the frosty ages you can hear them
Echoing behind us - listen!
All the long echoes, sing the same delight,
This Shortest Day,
As promise wakens in the sleeping land:
They carol, feast, give thanks,
And dearly love their friends,
And hope for peace.
And now so do we, here, now,
This year and every year.
Welcome Yule!

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/mabon02.html>

24 captures

15 Nov 2003 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Dec

06

2003 2004 2005

About this capture

click on thumbnail to see full-size picture
Tracey's wonderful
insta-tent

Beverly sets up

Gina

Cowgirl Maura

Cowgirl Vee

Cynthia kicks back

Tracey and Gina

Cynthia and Ron

>

Mighty Maura

Beverly with drum

Cynthia with drum

Jim

Maura as the Moon

Tracey cloaked

Maura of the Wood

Jim makes breakfast

Bartle and Jaymes

Procession

Labyrinth 1

Labyrinth 2

Labyrinth 3

Rock City

Beverly

Sphynx

Cave

On the trail

Toads rock!!!

Mabon 2002

ritual by Jim, pix by Valerie

The Circle of the Winged Toads went to Mount Diablo State Park for the Mabon weekend and did a really gooooooooood full-moon ritual on Saturday night, with Jim playing the moon up with his flute while we all watched entranced. We followed this with a fantastic feast (we are preserving our reputation as the best-fed coven in Northern California) and a campfire (actually charcoal in a fire pit as the fire danger was high) where we toasted marshmallows and introduced the Chef to S'mores (he liked them.)

Next morning we did a sunrise tai-chi Mabon ritual, led by Beverly, then ate a huge breakfast cooked by the men (yay!) and then another short ritual down at the labyrinth which had been constructed the previous afternoon by Cynthia and Ron (highly influenced by Andy Goldsworthy of "Rivers and Tides" fame). We each walked the labyrinth while the others sang and played percussion, and shared apples, the seeds of which will be planted next Eostre. After breaking camp we went for a hike in Rock City, which is an amazing place with huge wind-carved sandstone rocks, tiny cavelets, and a generally extraterrestrial feel to it. This is the first overnigher the current incarnation of the Toads has had, and it was wonderful to be able to hang out with each other and not rush off somewhere else. --vw

FULL MOON RITUAL

Jim "GoatHawke" Poket

SUPPLIES, MATERIALS, & TOOLS:

Athame

Chalice

3-Wicked Candle

Compass

Drum

Flutes

Herb

Lighter

Moon Pies
Musical noisemakers*
Peace Pipe
Ritual
Sage Bundle
Toad's Hollow Merlot

*Everyone that wants to should bring something.

RITUAL

All items placed on single altar to the East of the Circle.

The candle is lit with the incantation

" These three flames projecting from one source of wax represent the astrological trinity of Mother Earth, Lady Luna, and Father Sun floating in unison through the Universe. We are here tonight to honour Luna and her Magick. Yea, though the Sun projects its power on a daily basis, it is the Moon that follows the cycle of life, a silver menstruus of the cosmos. We cleanse our selves with the smoke of sage, sending our deficiencies into the night sky to be metamorphosed into something we may use".

Jim purifies each Covener while Tracey drums.

The four directions are invoked with the flute. As Jim turns, each direction is silently purified and sanctified with the candle and smudge drawing a pentacle in the air. After the flute plays, _____ says, " As the Moon above and the Earth below, what is between the Worlds concerns not the Worlds yet, will change the Worlds."

STORY:

How the Moon was born, told by Maura

INVOCATION:

"Luna, we are here tonight to honour you and call upon you to join us in our Circle. Grace us with your presence, for it is you and you alone that we seek. Join as you have joined our ancestors before. As your light cascades down upon us, bring your energy to our Circle and fill our hearts with your light. We sing our praise to you in voice and instrument. Come to us."

Raise cone of power with instruments and voice.

After cone of power is raised, "Thank you Luna for your presence and grace. As the flute serenades your presence, each of us will journey within and connect in whatever way is right for us".

(5 minutes of flute/meditation ending with the Flute song Reverence).

After the meditation is complete, Cakes and Ale with Moon Pies and Toad Hollow Merlot.

Valerie performs Feri devocation. Open Circle and sing Happy Trails.

Jim wrote later: I have a confession of sorts regarding [the full moon ritual]. When conditions are ideal I find myself in a meditative trance while playing the flute, somewhat akin to a mellow high from herb. I reached one of these states while playing the flute that night, (and to a lesser extent when walking the labyrinth while playing the flute the next day. Thank you to Cynthia and all who built the labyrinth, for there is something truly spiritual to me when I play the flute in one). By the end of playing my flute to Luna I had tears streaming my cheeks. I honestly know not why the tears flowed, yet they were a release I sorely needed. I originally shared this only with Gina, yet felt compelled to disregard my ego and share this experience with all of you who helped create it. THANK YOU!

Thank you also to Beverly for the Tai Chi based sunrise ritual. Thank you to Ron for organizing the trip, Maura for reading the Story of the Moon, and Tracey for leading us with her drum.

Thank you to all...TOADS RULE!!!!

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/yule01.html>

23 captures

1 Jul 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

Yule with the Toads
pix taken & tweaked by valerie,
recipes by Ron Miller
stories courtesy of Maura

Maura psyching herself for a day in the kitchen

the geese

the Chef carves

Willow, Tom, and Ron take a little liquid refreshment

Cynthia & Hal

Gail, Artemis, & the Prime Mover of the Universe

one side of the table

the other side of the table

Tracey parties hearty

your hostess and dishwasher

Otis in full cry

...and to all a goooooood niight

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

The Recipes:
[Gravlox](#)
[Mushroom timbales](#)
[How to roast a goose / Poultry brine](#)
[Xmas Pudding](#)

Yule stories

HOW THE SALMON CAME TO THE YUOK PEOPLE

A Native American Folk Tale

Coyote stood by the Klamath River one day, and thought to himself, "My people, the Yurok have no food. I wonder if I could find some in that mighty river. There must be something there. There ought to be fish in rivers. Where are all the fish?"

Coyote talks this over with his best friend, Mink. Mink said, "All the fish are up in the pond behind Salmon Grandmother's house. She's keeping them all for herself!"

"Well, then, I'll just have to journey up the river to free the fish!" said Coyote, although he knew it was a long trip to Salmon Grandmother's house. Coyote's grandchild, Wren, gave him a pouch of madrone berries for the trip, which are small and red, and look exactly like salmon's eggs!

Coyote began the long journey up to Salmon Grandmother's house. When he got there, he knocked on her door. "Who is it?" called Salmon Grandmother. Coyote replied, "I'm just a weary traveler, and I'm oh, so hungry and tired! I need a place to stay for the night." Of course, Salmon Grandmother took pity and asked him inside. She offered him some of her fresh, hot acorn soup, but just as she was getting ready to dish it up, Coyote popped a madrone berry into his mouth. Grandmother was rather surprised.

"Would you like some Salmon eggs?" Coyote offered. Grandmother thought, "Oh dear! This Coyote fellow knows about my salmon!" This worried her, because the salmon were her secret and she didn't want to share. But since he clearly already knew about the salmon, she couldn't offend him by just giving him acorn soup. So she picked up her dip net and went out to the pond in back. She dipped her net in the water, and pulled out a fine, fat silver salmon. Then she cooked it up on skewers over a pit of coals and they had a delicious dinner.

After the meal, Grandmother told Coyote he was welcome to rest and stay overnight. Making himself comfortable, Coyote announced he would be going out the sweat lodge. He brought his magic flute with him into the lodge. Coyote started to play a lovely little tune on his flute. He played and played, and when Grandmother heard the sweet strains of beautiful music she became drowsy. Finally, she finally fell into a deep sleep. Once she drifted off, Coyote left his flute playing in the sweat lodge, since of course it was a magic flute that could play by itself. He went out to the salmon pond in back, and began to dig. He dug and dug all night, forming a trench from the pond to the nearby river. Towards dawn, Grandmother woke up and heard the flute still playing. "Something is not right here! Who can play the flute for that long?" Suddenly it hits her.

"My salmon," she shouted, "He's stealing my salmon!!!" She jumped out of bed, and raced around to the back of the house. She got there just in time to see Coyote digging out the last little patch of dirt between the pond and the river. Coyote lopes down the

riverbank, laughing as all of her salmon swim free into the Klamath. And that's how the salmon came to the Klamath river to feed the Yurok!

The Shortest Day
by Susan Cooper

And so the Shortest Day came and the year died
And everywhere down the centuries of the snow-white world
Came people singing, dancing,
To drive the dark away.
They lighted candles in the winter trees;
They hung their homes with evergreen;
They burned beseeching fires all night long
To keep the year alive.
And when the new year's sunshine blazed awake
They shouted, revelling.
Through all the frosty ages you can hear them
Echoing behind us - listen!
All the long echoes, sing the same delight,
This Shortest Day,
As promise wakens in the sleeping land:
They carol, feast, give thanks,
And dearly love their friends,
And hope for peace.
And now so do we, here, now,
This year and every year.
Welcome Yule!

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/yule01.html>

23 captures

1 Jul 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Yule with the Toads
pix taken & tweaked by valerie,

recipes by Ron Miller
stories courtesy of Maura

Maura psyching herself for a day in the kitchen

the geese

the Chef carves

Willow, Tom, and Ron take a little liquid refreshment

Cynthia & Hal

Gail, Artemis, & the Prime Mover of the Universe

one side of the table

the other side of the table

Tracey parties hearty

your hostess and dishwasher

Otis in full cry

...and to all a goooooood niight

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

The Recipes:

Gravlox
Mushroom timbales
How to roast a goose / Poultry brine
Xmas Pudding

Yule stories

HOW THE SALMON CAME TO THE YUROK PEOPLE

A Native American Folk Tale

Coyote stood by the Klamath River one day, and thought to himself, "My people, the Yurok have no food. I wonder if I could find some in that mighty river. There must be something there. There ought to be fish in rivers. Where are all the fish?"

Coyote talks this over with his best friend, Mink. Mink said, "All the fish are up in the pond behind Salmon Grandmother's house. She's keeping them all for herself!"

"Well, then, I'll just have to journey up the river to free the fish!" said Coyote, although he knew it was a long trip to Salmon Grandmother's house. Coyote's grandchild, Wren, gave him a pouch of madrone berries for the trip, which are small and red, and look exactly like salmon's eggs!

Coyote began the long journey up to Salmon Grandmother's house. When he got there, he knocked on her door. "Who is it?" called Salmon Grandmother. Coyote replied, "I'm just a weary traveler, and I'm oh, so hungry and tired! I need a place to stay for the night." Of course, Salmon Grandmother took pity and asked him inside. She offered him some of her fresh, hot acorn soup, but just as she was getting ready to dish it up, Coyote popped a madrone berry into his mouth. Grandmother was rather surprised.

"Would you like some Salmon eggs?" Coyote offered. Grandmother thought, "Oh dear! This Coyote fellow knows about my salmon!" This worried her, because the salmon were her secret and she didn't want to share. But since he clearly already knew about the salmon, she couldn't offend him by just giving him acorn soup. So she picked up her dip net and went out to the pond in back. She dipped her net in the water, and pulled out a fine, fat silver salmon. Then she cooked it up on skewers over a pit of coals and they had a delicious dinner.

After the meal, Grandmother told Coyote he was welcome to rest and stay overnight. Making himself comfortable, Coyote announced he would be going out the sweat lodge. He brought his magic flute with him into the lodge. Coyote started to play a lovely little tune on his flute. He played and played, and when Grandmother heard the sweet strains of beautiful music she became drowsy. Finally, she finally fell into a deep sleep. Once she drifted off, Coyote left his flute playing in the sweat lodge, since of course it was a magic flute that could play by itself. He went out to the salmon pond in back, and began to dig. He dug and dug all night, forming a trench from the pond to the nearby river. Towards dawn, Grandmother woke up and heard the flute still playing. "Something is not right here! Who can play the flute for that long?" Suddenly it hits her.

"My salmon," she shouted, "He's stealing my salmon!!!!" She jumped out of bed, and raced around to the back of the house. She got there just in time to see Coyote digging out the last little patch of dirt between the pond and the river. Coyote lopes down the riverbank, laughing as all of her salmon swim free into the Klamath. And that's how the salmon came to the Klamath river to feed the Yurok!

The Shortest Day
by Susan Cooper

And so the Shortest Day came and the year died
And everywhere down the centuries of the snow-white world
Came people singing, dancing,
To drive the dark away.
They lighted candles in the winter trees;
They hung their homes with evergreen;
They burned beseeching fires all night long
To keep the year alive.
And when the new year's sunshine blazed awake
They shouted, revelling.
Through all the frosty ages you can hear them
Echoing behind us - listen!
All the long echoes, sing the same delight,
This Shortest Day,
As promise wakens in the sleeping land:
They carol, feast, give thanks,
And dearly love their friends,
And hope for peace.
And now so do we, here, now,
This year and every year.
Welcome Yule!

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/yule01.html>

23 captures

1 Jul 2002 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Yule with the Toads
pix taken & tweaked by valerie,
recipes by Ron Miller
stories courtesy of Maura

Maura psyching herself for a day in the kitchen

the geese

the Chef carves

Willow, Tom, and Ron take a little liquid refreshment

Cynthia & Hal

Gail, Artemis, & the Prime Mover of the Universe

one side of the table

the other side of the table

Tracey parties hearty

your hostess and dishwasher

Otis in full cry

...and to all a goooooood niight

top

TOC
home

The Recipes:

Gravlox

Mushroom timbales

How to roast a goose / Poultry brine

Xmas Pudding

Yule stories

HOW THE SALMON CAME TO THE YUOK PEOPLE

A Native American Folk Tale

Coyote stood by the Klamath River one day, and thought to himself, "My people, the Yurok have no food. I wonder if I could find some in that mighty river. There must be something there. There ought to be fish in rivers. Where are all the fish?"

Coyote talks this over with his best friend, Mink. Mink said, "All the fish are up in the pond behind Salmon Grandmother's house. She's keeping them all for herself!"

"Well, then, I'll just have to journey up the river to free the fish!" said Coyote, although he knew it was a long trip to Salmon Grandmother's house. Coyote's grandchild, Wren, gave him a pouch of madrone berries for the trip, which are small and red, and look exactly like salmon's eggs!

Coyote began the long journey up to Salmon Grandmother's house. When he got there, he knocked on her door. "Who is it?" called Salmon Grandmother. Coyote replied, "I'm just a weary traveler, and I'm oh, so hungry and tired! I need a place to stay for the night." Of course, Salmon Grandmother took pity and asked him inside. She offered him some of her fresh, hot acorn soup, but just as she was getting ready to dish it up, Coyote popped a madrone berry into his mouth. Grandmother was rather surprised.

"Would you like some Salmon eggs?" Coyote offered. Grandmother thought, "Oh dear! This Coyote fellow knows about my salmon!" This worried her, because the salmon were her secret and she didn't want to share. But since he clearly already knew about the salmon, she couldn't offend him by just giving him acorn soup. So she picked up her dip net and went out to the pond in back. She dipped her net in the water, and pulled out a fine, fat silver salmon. Then she cooked it up on skewers over a pit of coals and they had a delicious dinner.

After the meal, Grandmother told Coyote he was welcome to rest and stay overnight. Making himself comfortable, Coyote announced he would be going out the sweat lodge. He brought his magic flute with him into the lodge. Coyote started to play a lovely little tune on his flute. He played and played, and when Grandmother heard the sweet strains of beautiful music she became drowsy. Finally, she finally fell into a deep sleep. Once she drifted off, Coyote left his flute playing in the sweat lodge, since of course it was a

magic flute that could play by itself. He went out to the salmon pond in back, and began to dig. He dug and dug all night, forming a trench from the pond to the nearby river. Towards dawn, Grandmother woke up and heard the flute still playing. "Something is not right here! Who can play the flute for that long?" Suddenly it hits her.

"My salmon," she shouted, "He's stealing my salmon!!!" She jumped out of bed, and raced around to the back of the house. She got there just in time to see Coyote digging out the last little patch of dirt between the pond and the river. Coyote lopes down the riverbank, laughing as all of her salmon swim free into the Klamath. And that's how the salmon came to the Klamath river to feed the Yurok!

The Shortest Day by Susan Cooper

And so the Shortest Day came and the year died
And everywhere down the centuries of the snow-white world
Came people singing, dancing,
To drive the dark away.
They lighted candles in the winter trees;
They hung their homes with evergreen;
They burned beseeching fires all night long
To keep the year alive.
And when the new year's sunshine blazed awake
They shouted, revelling.
Through all the frosty ages you can hear them
Echoing behind us - listen!
All the long echoes, sing the same delight,
This Shortest Day,
As promise wakens in the sleeping land:
They carol, feast, give thanks,
And dearly love their friends,
And hope for peace.
And now so do we, here, now,
This year and every year.
Welcome Yule!

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/mabon02.html>

24 captures

15 Nov 2003 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Dec

06

2003 2004 2005

About this capture

click on thumbnail to see full-size picture
Tracey's wonderful
insta-tent

Beverly sets up

Gina

Cowgirl Maura

Cowgirl Vee

Cynthia kicks back

Tracey and Gina

Cynthia and Ron

>

Mighty Maura

Beverly with drum

Cynthia with drum

Jim

Maura as the Moon

Tracey cloaked

Maura of the Wood

Jim makes breakfast

Bartle and Jaymes

Procession

Labyrinth 1

Labyrinth 2

Labyrinth 3

Rock City

Beverly

Sphynx

Cave

On the trail

Toads rock!!!

Mabon 2002

ritual by Jim, pix by Valerie

The Circle of the Winged Toads went to Mount Diablo State Park for the Mabon weekend and did a really gooooooooood full-moon ritual on Saturday night, with Jim playing the moon up with his flute while we all watched entranced. We followed this with a fantastic feast (we are preserving our reputation as the best-fed coven in Northern California) and a campfire (actually charcoal in a fire pit as the fire danger was high) where we toasted marshmallows and introduced the Chef to S'mores (he liked them.)

Next morning we did a sunrise tai-chi Mabon ritual, led by Beverly, then ate a huge breakfast cooked by the men (yay!) and then another short ritual down at the labyrinth which had been constructed the previous afternoon by Cynthia and Ron (highly influenced by Andy Goldsworthy of "Rivers and Tides" fame). We each walked the labyrinth while the others sang and played percussion, and shared apples, the seeds of which will be planted next Eostre. After breaking camp we went for a hike in Rock City, which is an amazing place with huge wind-carved sandstone rocks, tiny cavelets, and a generally extraterrestrial feel to it. This is the first overnigher the current incarnation of the Toads has had, and it was wonderful to be able to hang out with each other and not rush off somewhere else. --vw

FULL MOON RITUAL

Jim "GoatHawke" Poket

SUPPLIES, MATERIALS, & TOOLS:

Athame

Chalice

3-Wicked Candle

Compass

Drum

Flutes

Herb

Lighter

Moon Pies

Musical noisemakers*

Peace Pipe

Ritual

Sage Bundle

Toad's Hollow Merlot

*Everyone that wants to should bring something.

RITUAL

All items placed on single altar to the East of the Circle.

The candle is lit with the incantation

" These three flames projecting from one source of wax represent the astrological trinity of Mother Earth, Lady Luna, and Father Sun floating in unison through the Universe. We are here tonight to honour Luna and her Magick. Yea, though the Sun projects its power on a daily basis, it is the Moon that follows the cycle of life, a silver menstruus of the cosmos. We cleanse our selves with the smoke of sage, sending our deficiencies into the night sky to be metamorphosed into something we may use".

Jim purifies each Covener while Tracey drums.

The four directions are invoked with the flute. As Jim turns, each direction is silently purified and sanctified with the candle and smudge drawing a pentacle in the air. After the flute plays, _____ says, " As the Moon above and the Earth below, what is between the Worlds concerns not the Worlds yet, will change the Worlds."

STORY:

How the Moon was born, told by Maura

INVOCATION:

"Luna, we are here tonight to honour you and call upon you to join us in our Circle. Grace us with your presence, for it is you and you alone that we seek. Join as you have joined our ancestors before. As your light cascades down upon us, bring your energy to our Circle and fill our hearts with your light. We sing our praise to you in voice and instrument. Come to us."

Raise cone of power with instruments and voice.

After cone of power is raised, "Thank you Luna for your presence and grace. As the flute serenades your presence, each of us will journey within and connect in whatever way is right for us".

(5 minutes of flute/meditation ending with the Flute song Reverence).

After the meditation is complete, Cakes and Ale with Moon Pies and Toad Hollow Merlot.

Valerie performs Feri devocation. Open Circle and sing Happy Trails.

Jim wrote later: I have a confession of sorts regarding [the full moon ritual]. When

conditions are ideal I find myself in a meditative trance while playing the flute, somewhat akin to a mellow high from herb. I reached one of these states while playing the flute that night, (and to a lesser extent when walking the labyrinth while playing the flute the next day. Thank you to Cynthia and all who built the labyrinth, for there is something truly spiritual to me when I play the flute in one). By the end of playing my flute to Luna I had tears streaming my cheeks. I honestly know not why the tears flowed, yet they were a release I sorely needed. I originally shared this only with Gina, yet felt compelled to disregard my ego and share this experience with all of you who helped create it. THANK YOU!

Thank you also to Beverly for the Tai Chi based sunrise ritual. Thank you to Ron for organizing the trip, Maura for reading the Story of the Moon, and Tracey for leading us with her drum.

Thank you to all...TOADS RULE!!!!

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/grounding.html>
24 captures
16 Mar 2003 - 31 Dec 2009
Jun AUG Oct
06
2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

Grounding and Centering
Valerie Walker

Assume a comfortable position, either standing or seated. Breathe deeply from the solar plexus, filling and emptying your lungs completely at least three times. Feel the energy

in your body, and pull it in from your extremities into the center of your body.

Let all the tension, aches and pains, and other distractions both positive and negative coalesce into a ball of energy. Locate that ball of energy a little below your navel, at the point called in tai chi the "dan tien". Bring in as much of your energy into this ball as you can, and then send the ball down your spine, dividing at the base of the spine and sending the energy down each of your legs to the floor.

Feel the energy reaching out, sending tendrils, root, into the floor, down through the structure of the house. Feel the energy roots tunnel into the earth, go down past the layer of earth and into the rocks beneath. send the energy down through the rocks, deep into the center of the planet, deep into the place where the rocks are molten, where the fire of the Mother plays at the center.

Join your energy with that fire in the earth. Let it become one with the fire at the heart of the earth, let it become purified by that fire.

(Pause as long as you need to)

Now begin to take back your individual energy, burnt clean and purified by the Mother's fire. Bring the energy back up the roots you put down, pulling the roots after you as you let the energy rise up through the cooled rocks, up through the layers of rock, earth, floor, and back into your body again.

Pull the energy up into the base of your spine, and join it with any lingering distractions left in your body. Bring it up the spine, changing its color as you move up the chakras from deep red to orange to yellow to green to turquoise to indigo to purple at the crown. Then let the purple light beam out the top of your head, up through the air, through the ceiling, through the roof, up into the air, up into the thinning layers of the atmosphere

Beam the energy up and out away from this planet, out into space, out past the planets, out to the spaces between the stars. Let your energy play with the galaxies, the nebulae, the stars, the shining heavens.

(Pause as long as you need to)

Now bring your energy in from its play with the heaven shiner. Bring it in through space, into the solar system, into the orbit of the earth, into Earth's atmosphere. Let the energy return down through the air, through the roof, through the ceiling, down into the top of your head.

Feel the energy spread throughout your entire body. Let it fill you, and let it change color to a light blue, like a gas flame. Fill yourself with this blue fire, and feel how you are the link between that which is below and that which is above. Feel yourself at this particular place, at this particular instant of time. Rest in this knowledge: be here now.

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

http://cgee.hamline.edu/see/goldsworthy/see_an_andy.html

572 captures

18 Feb 1999 - 27 Dec 2024

Jul AUG Sep

06

2003 2004 2005

[About this capture](#)

Hamline University Graduate School of Education, St. Paul, MN

Artist/Naturalist Pages

Andy Goldsworthy

[Click to enlarge.](#)

Andy Goldsworthy is a brilliant British artist who collaborates with nature to make his creations. Besides England and Scotland, his work has been created at the North Pole, in Japan, the Australian Outback, and in the U.S.

In the picture above he is fine-tuning an arch of slate.

Goldsworthy regards all his creations as temporary. He photographs each piece once right after he makes it. His goal is to understand nature by directly participating in nature as intimately as he can. He generally works with whatever he notices: twigs, leaves, stones, snow and ice, reeds and thorns.

More text below pictures.

[click images to enlarge](#)

Dandelions -- icicle star

Goose feathers -- pebbles with hole

Iris leaves & rowan berries -- hollow ice ball

cherry leaves -- snow slab with circles

oak leaves in three holes

Pigeon Feathers -- Broken Pebbles

Poppy petals wrapped on boulder -- rowan leaves with hole

Soul of a Tree Ice spiralling a tree

Quotes from Andy Goldsworthy

I enjoy the freedom of just using my hands and "found" tools--a sharp stone, the quill of a feather, thorns. I take the opportunities each day offers: if it is snowing, I work with snow, at leaf-fall it will be with leaves; a blown-over tree becomes a source of twigs and branches. I stop at a place or pick up a material because I feel that there is something to be discovered. Here is where I can learn.

Looking, touching, material, place and form are all inseparable from the resulting work. It is difficult to say where one stops and another begins. The energy and space around a material are as important as the energy and space within. The weather—rain, sun, snow, hail, mist, calm—is that external space made visible. When I touch a rock, I am touching and working the space around it. It is not independent of its surroundings, and the way it sits tells how it came to be there.

I want to get under the surface. When I work with a leaf, rock, stick, it is not just that material in itself, it is an opening into the processes of life within and around it. When I leave it, these processes continue.

Movement, change, light, growth and decay are the lifeblood of nature, the energies that I try to tap through my work. I need the shock of touch, the resistance of place, materials and weather, the earth as my source. Nature is in a state of change and that change is the key to understanding. I want my art to be sensitive and alert to changes in material, season and weather. Each work grows, stays, decays. Process and decay are implicit. Transience in my work reflects what I find in nature.

[Top of Page](#)

[Return to Artist/Naturalist Index](#)

[SEE Links](#)

[SEE Home Page](#) | [SEE ONLINE](#) [SEE Links](#)

[SEE Home Page](#) | [SEE ONLINE](#) | [SEE Kids Art Gallery](#)| [Go Deeper](#)|[Artist/Naturalists](#)

Other CGEE & Hamline University public links:

[CGEE Home Page](#) | [Friends of Frogs](#) | [Rivers of Life](#) | [Courses & Institutes](#) | [Hamline Home Page](#)

Center for Global Environmental Education

Hamline University Graduate School of Education

1536 Hewitt Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55104-1284

Phone: 651-523-2480 Fax: 651-523-2987

© 1999 CGEE. All Rights Reserved.

http://cgee.hamline.edu/see/goldsworthy/see_an_andy.html

572 captures

18 Feb 1999 - 27 Dec 2024

Jul AUG Sep

06

2003 2004 2005

[About this capture](#)

Hamline University Graduate School of Education, St. Paul, MN

[Artist/Naturalist Pages](#)

[Andy Goldsworthy](#)

[Click to enlarge.](#)

Andy Goldsworthy is a brilliant British artist who collaborates with nature to make his creations. Besides England and Scotland, his work has been created at the North Pole, in Japan, the Australian Outback, and in the U.S.

In the picture above he is fine-tuning an arch of slate.

Goldsworthy regards all his creations as temporary. He photographs each piece once right after he makes it. His goal is to understand nature by directly participating in nature as intimately as he can. He generally works with whatever he notices: twigs, leaves, stones, snow and ice, reeds and thorns.

More text below pictures.

[click images to enlarge](#)

Dandelions -- icicle star

Goose feathers -- pebbles with hole

Iris leaves & rowan berries -- hollow ice ball

cherry leaves -- snow slab with circles

oak leaves in three holes

Pigeon Feathers -- Broken Pebbles

Poppy petals wrapped on boulder -- rowan leaves with hole

Soul of a Tree Ice spiralling a tree

Quotes from Andy Goldsworthy

I enjoy the freedom of just using my hands and "found" tools--a sharp stone, the quill of a feather, thorns. I take the opportunities each day offers: if it is snowing, I work with snow, at leaf-fall it will be with leaves; a blown-over tree becomes a source of twigs and branches. I stop at a place or pick up a material because I feel that there is something to be discovered. Here is where I can learn.

Looking, touching, material, place and form are all inseparable from the resulting work. It is difficult to say where one stops and another begins. The energy and space around a material are as important as the energy and space within. The weather—rain, sun, snow, hail, mist, calm—is that external space made visible. When I touch a rock, I am touching and working the space around it. It is not independent of its surroundings, and the way it sits tells how it came to be there.

I want to get under the surface. When I work with a leaf, rock, stick, it is not just that material in itself, it is an opening into the processes of life within and around it. When I leave it, these processes continue.

Movement, change, light, growth and decay are the lifeblood of nature, the energies that I try to tap through my work. I need the shock of touch, the resistance of place, materials and weather, the earth as my source. Nature is in a state of change and that change is the key to understanding. I want my art to be sensitive and alert to changes in material, season and weather. Each work grows, stays, decays. Process and decay are implicit. Transience in my work reflects what I find in nature.

Top of Page

[Return to Artist/Naturalist Index](#)

[SEE Links](#)

[SEE Home Page](#) | [SEE ONLINE SEE Links](#)

[SEE Home Page](#) | [SEE ONLINE](#) | [SEE Kids Art Gallery](#) | [Go Deeper](#) | [Artist/Naturalists](#)

Other CGEE & Hamline University public links:

[CGEE Home Page](#) | [Friends of Frogs](#) | [Rivers of Life](#) | [Courses & Institutes](#) | [Hamline Home Page](#)

Center for Global Environmental Education

Hamline University Graduate School of Education

1536 Hewitt Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55104-1284

Phone: 651-523-2480 Fax: 651-523-2987

© 1999 CGEE. All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/mabon02.html>

24 captures

15 Nov 2003 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Dec

06

2003 2004 2005

[About this capture](#)

[click on thumbnail to see full-size picture](#)

[Tracey's wonderful](#)

[insta-tent](#)

[Beverly sets up](#)

[Gina](#)

[Cowgirl Maura](#)

[Cowgirl Vee](#)

[Cynthia kicks back](#)

[Tracey and Gina](#)

[Cynthia and Ron](#)

[>](#)

[Mighty Maura](#)

[Beverly with drum](#)

Cynthia with drum

Jim

Maura as the Moon

Tracey cloaked

Maura of the Wood

Jim makes breakfast

Bartle and Jaymes

Procession

Labyrinth 1

Labyrinth 2

Labyrinth 3

Rock City

Beverly

Sphynx

Cave

On the trail

Toads rock!!!

Mabon 2002

ritual by Jim, pix by Valerie

The Circle of the Winged Toads went to Mount Diablo State Park for the Mabon weekend and did a really gooooooooood full-moon ritual on Saturday night, with Jim playing the moon up with his flute while we all watched entranced. We followed this with a fantastic feast (we are preserving our reputation as the best-fed coven in Northern California) and a campfire (actually charcoal in a fire pit as the fire danger was high) where we toasted marshmallows and introduced the Chef to S'mores (he liked them.)

Next morning we did a sunrise tai-chi Mabon ritual, led by Beverly, then ate a huge breakfast cooked by the men (yay!) and then another short ritual down at the labyrinth

which had been constructed the previous afternoon by Cynthia and Ron (highly influenced by Andy Goldsworthy of "Rivers and Tides" fame). We each walked the labyrinth while the others sang and played percussion, and shared apples, the seeds of which will be planted next Eostre. After breaking camp we went for a hike in Rock City, which is an amazing place with huge wind-carved sandstone rocks, tiny cavelets, and a generally extraterrestrial feel to it. This is the first overnighiter the current incarnation of the Toads has had, and it was wonderful to be able to hang out with each other and not rush off somewhere else. --vw

FULL MOON RITUAL

Jim "GoatHawke" Poket

SUPPLIES, MATERIALS, & TOOLS:

Athame
Chalice
3-Wicked Candle
Compass
Drum
Flutes
Herb
Lighter
Moon Pies
Musical noisemakers*
Peace Pipe
Ritual
Sage Bundle
Toad's Hollow Merlot

*Everyone that wants to should bring something.

RITUAL

All items placed on single altar to the East of the Circle.

The candle is lit with the incantation

" These three flames projecting from one source of wax represent the astrological trinity of Mother Earth, Lady Luna, and Father Sun floating in unison through the Universe. We are here tonight to honour Luna and her Magick. Yea, though the Sun projects its power on a daily basis, it is the Moon that follows the cycle of life, a silver menstruus of the cosmos. We cleanse our selves with the smoke of sage, sending our deficiencies into the night sky to be metamorphosed into something we may use".

Jim purifies each Covener while Tracey drums.

The four directions are invoked with the flute. As Jim turns, each direction is silently purified and sanctified with the candle and smudge drawing a pentacle in the air. After the flute plays, _____ says, " As the Moon above and the Earth below, what

is between the Worlds concerns not the Worlds yet, will change the Worlds."

STORY:

How the Moon was born, told by Maura

INVOCATION:

"Luna, we are here tonight to honour you and call upon you to join us in our Circle. Grace us with your presence, for it is you and you alone that we seek. Join as you have joined our ancestors before. As your light cascades down upon us, bring your energy to our Circle and fill our hearts with your light. We sing our praise to you in voice and instrument. Come to us."

Raise cone of power with instruments and voice.

After cone of power is raised, "Thank you Luna for your presence and grace. As the flute serenades your presence, each of us will journey within and connect in whatever way is right for us".

(5 minutes of flute/meditation ending with the Flute song Reverence).

After the meditation is complete, Cakes and Ale with Moon Pies and Toad Hollow Merlot.

Valerie performs Feri devocation. Open Circle and sing Happy Trails.

Jim wrote later: I have a confession of sorts regarding [the full moon ritual]. When conditions are ideal I find myself in a meditative trance while playing the flute, somewhat akin to a mellow high from herb. I reached one of these states while playing the flute that night, (and to a lesser extent when walking the labyrinth while playing the flute the next day. Thank you to Cynthia and all who built the labyrinth, for there is something truly spiritual to me when I play the flute in one). By the end of playing my flute to Luna I had tears streaming my cheeks. I honestly know not why the tears flowed, yet they were a release I sorely needed. I originally shared this only with Gina, yet felt compelled to disregard my ego and share this experience with all of you who helped create it. THANK YOU!

Thank you also to Beverly for the Tai Chi based sunrise ritual. Thank you to Ron for organizing the trip, Maura for reading the Story of the Moon, and Tracey for leading us with her drum.

Thank you to all...TOADS RULE!!!!

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/grounding.html>

24 captures

16 Mar 2003 - 31 Dec 2009

Jun AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

About this capture

Grounding and Centering

Valerie Walker

Assume a comfortable position, either standing or seated. Breathe deeply from the solar plexus, filling and emptying your lungs completely at least three times. Feel the energy in your body, and pull it in from your extremities into the center of your body.

Let all the tension, aches and pains, and other distractions both positive and negative coalesce into a ball of energy. Locate that ball of energy a little below your navel, at the point called in tai chi the "dan tien". Bring in as much of your energy into this ball as you can, and then send the ball down your spine, dividing at the base of the spine and sending the energy down each of your legs to the floor.

Feel the energy reaching out, sending tendrils, root, into the floor, down through the structure of the house. Feel the energy roots tunnel into the earth, go down past the layer of earth and into the rocks beneath. send the energy down through the rocks, deep into the center of the planet, deep into the place where the rocks are molten, where the fire of the Mother plays at the center.

Join your energy with that fire in the earth. Let it become one with the fire at the heart of the earth, let it become purified by that fire.

(Pause as long as you need to)

Now begin to take back your individual energy, burnt clean and purified by the Mother's fire. Bring the energy back up the roots you put down, pulling the roots after you as you let the energy rise up through the cooled rocks, up through the layers of rock, earth,

floor, and back into your body again.

Pull the energy up into the base of your spine, and join it with any lingering distractions left in your body. Bring it up the spine, changing its color as you move up the chakras from deep red to orange to yellow to green to turquoise to indigo to purple at the crown. Then let the purple light beam out the top of your head, up through the air, through the ceiling, through the roof, up into the air, up into the thinning layers of the atmosphere

Beam the energy up and out away from this planet, out into space, out past the planets, out to the spaces between the stars. Let your energy play with the galaxies, the nebulae, the stars, the shining heavens.

(Pause as long as you need to)

Now bring your energy in from its play with the heaven shiner. Bring it in through space, into the solar system, into the orbit of the earth, into Earth's atmosphere. Let the energy return down through the air, through the roof, through the ceiling, down into the top of your head.

Feel the energy spread throughout your entire body. Let it fill you, and let it change color to a light blue, like a gas flame. Fill yourself with this blue fire, and feel how you are the link between that which is below and that which is above. Feel yourself at this particular place, at this particular instant of time. Rest in this knowledge: be here now.

[top](#)
[TOC](#)
[home](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/andraste.html>

36 captures

24 Apr 2001 - 18 Apr 2010

Feb AUG Oct

06

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

The Faery Tradition
an interview with Andraste by Leah Samul
reprinted from the Compost Newsletter

Q: Each different tradition in the Craft has its own distinguishing features; what is it about the Faery tradition that makes it different from other traditions in the Craft?

A: Fifteen Faery tradition practitioners met in June of 1988 to discuss this and other questions. What they agreed upon as Faery Tradition essentials comprises the following. Many of these features can be claimed by other traditions as well, and various Faery practitioners may accent some of these more than others.

A belief in a particular Faery Power which can be accessed characterizes the lineage, which exists as an ecstatic, rather than a fertility, tradition. A strong emphasis is placed on sensual experience and awareness, including sexual mysticism, which is not limited to heterosexual expression. In this, as in the general spirit of a spiritual exploration, there is more risk-taking encouraged than in other Wiccan traditions which have specific laws limiting behavior, and there is a certain amorality historically associated with the Tradition. We see ourselves, when enchanted, as "fey"--not black, not white, outside social definitions, on the road to Faeryland, either mad or poetical. We are aware that much of reality is unseen, or at least has uncertain boundaries. As in all the Craft, there is a deep respect for the wisdom of Nature, a love of beauty, and an appreciation of bardic and mantic creativity. There is a specific corpus of chants and liturgical material, much of it stemming from Victor and Gwydion, which provides a frame for Circle-workings, but poetic creativity is highly valued. The practice is heavily invocatory, with encouragement of deity possession, which relies mainly on psychic talent or sensitivity to occur, rather than the existence of a specific induction technique. Rites are stylistically diverse, and may draw from many sources.

There is an initiatory lineage, traceable to Victor, Cora, or Gwydion, although Victor tells of antecedents of the present tradition in the coven in which he was involved in the 1920's and 30's in Oregon. Aspects of the tradition are possession of secret names, the practice of energy-working using the pentacles, a body of poetic and liturgical material,

information on the Deities; many archetypes are recognized which are specific to the Tradition, the doctrine of the Three Selves, a cingulum of a specific color, a "tribal" or "clan" feel to the coven, the use of the horned (sometimes called "inverted") pentagram, and to some extent the honoring of a warrior ethic, rather like bushido. For example, we are urged not to coddle weakness, support others in insincerities or self-deceptions, and never submit one's own Life force to anyone or anything, ever, which leads to a fierce openness called the "Black Heart of Innocence."

Perhaps what has gained the most attention is that the Faery Tradition is gender-equal, and all sexual orientations seem to be able to find a niche. For many, there is a strong identification with the realms of Faery and with shape-shifting.

Q: Many members of the Craft would freely admit that modern day Witchcraft has been "put together" from a variety of sources by the leading members of the individual traditions. Gerald Gardner, Raymond Buckland, and even Starhawk have definitely created traditions that bear their own individual stamp. Do you think this is true for Victor Anderson in the Faery tradition? Or more pointedly: is there a Faery tradition separate from Victor Anderson's own writings and influence? Are there other visionaries in the Faery tradition besides Anderson? How much of the Faery tradition do you think that Victor Anderson "made up" by welding ancient sources to his own personal vision?

A: Although Victor is universally recognized as the founding teacher of the tradition, it is possible to identify influences which shaped the tradition before its present form evolved. There is a strong African diasporic influence, primarily Dahomean-Haitian, and the Three Selves theory is an outgrowth of Huna, as described by Max Freedom Long. Further, there are elements from fiction, including Robert E. Howard, H. P. Lovecraft, and the Necronomicon. Neither is Victor the only source for material presently within the tradition. Each initiate seems to draw the tradition in a somewhat new direction and uncover new ground. According to Gwydion, the early Faery Tradition had much in common with the published materials of the Farrars' accounts of outer-court Gardnerian/Alexandrian rituals. I have not seen this today. Some practitioners, such as Gwydion and Eldri Littlewolf, went deeply into shamanic forms. Gwydion also worked extensively with Celtic religion, even learning Welsh, as did Gabriel (né Caradoc) in the early part of his Wiccan training.

Other influences entered as Gabriel began teaching: Arica training, Tibetan meditation, and a modicum of Ceremonial Magick are all elements. According to Eldri, Caradoc has written some beautiful poetry, both ritual and otherwise, but I have seen little of it. Gabriel's classes are one of the best extant trainings in magical visualization I have encountered. Brian Dragon and members of his lineage have contributed darkly powerful poetry and ritual liturgy, though he was "excommunicated" from the tradition by Caradoc, his initiator, with Victor's assent. This excommunication is not recognized by all members of the tradition. Though there is much borrowing, a central vision is maintained, and this has grown as liturgical material has been amassed. More recently, initiates such as poet Francesca Dubie and songwriter Keara West have added their inspiration to the corpus of material. Since many of the present day initiates have had

minimal direct exposure to Victor's presence, and Thorns of the Blood Rose is often out of print, there has been less reliance on Victor's teachings than in earlier days, when Gwydion studied with him for many years, starting at the age of thirteen. Aspects of Victor's practice, such as the African-diasporic tradition, are being strengthened and re-woven into the tradition by initiates with cross-training and initiations in Santeria.

Starhawk has used elements and concepts developed in the Faery Tradition in expressing her beliefs and practice, and in many cases has given the world some of the clearest explanations currently available of concepts such as the Three Selves or the Iron Pentacle.

Q: Looking at the modern day Craft, it seems that there are two main points of focus or approaches to it: one is the shamanic approach, the other is the ecological approach. For example, many covens are active in non-violent action involving the fate of the earth. It seems to me that the Faery tradition is quite shamanistic. Is it at all concerned with the ecological focus that one sees in other branches of the Craft?

A: As the question is posed, I'm not entirely certain what you mean by "ecological" versus "shamanistic" approaches, and I have interpolated that you mean the distinction between political approaches to magickal activity and religio-magickal approaches. It's hard to answer in general terms for the tradition as a whole, since this topic becomes a spectrum of motivations for magickal workings, rather than a strict dyad between political and religious. Individuals will naturally range themselves along the spectrum, according to their wills and karmic tendencies. Also, the people with whom I prefer to work tend to share my perspectives, and will color my impressions. I wouldn't say someone is not a Faery Tradition practitioner because s/he supported or didn't support a particular political stance. Victor and Starhawk, for example, became estranged over politics and particularly over the issue of nuclear power plants and nuclear research. Political magick of the Reclaiming or Earth First! type often makes "traditionalist" witches uneasy, but this is probably more of a challenge to their political worldview, than a critique of magick as a tool.

Other than the Reclaiming branch of initiates, it is probably safe to say that many of the current practitioners are not openly politically active in demonstrations, civil disobedience, and so forth. But this does not mean that the focus of their magick, or the content of their communications are any less political or even less radical. Politics and religion are not mutually exclusive. The environment is a focus for magickal work throughout the Pagan movement, and the Faery Tradition is no exception. For most of us, our politics grow out of our spirituality, and the mysteries we have experienced, rather than vice-versa.

Q: What is your sense of the place and direction of the Faery Tradition within the neopagan movement?

A: Gods are not just constructs or psychological forces from the collective unconscious. The Gods are real, with a system of morality different from our own, and we have a

responsibility to them. The Faery Tradition, in common with initiatory lineages of the Craft which practice possession, is a mystery tradition of power, ecstasy, and direct communication with divinity.

This is in contrast to traditions which practice psychodrama or psychotherapy through ritual. The negative side of this (the Faery) style of working is that we have a lot of initiates who might be classed as "burnouts", who did not return unscathed from between the worlds. the tradition is not for everybody; it is certainly not amenable to mass attendance, like many other Pagan paths. Gabriel has been trying to evolve an outer court and a system of degrees in what was originally a one-degree system. There are more interested seekers than openings with teachers.

Q: If you had a "wish list" for the future of the Faery Tradition within the Neo-Pagan movement, what direction would you like the Faeries to go in?

A: I would like to see a rejoining and sharing among the many "lone-wolves" making up the tradition. It would be nice to able to learn from one another, to discuss liturgy and magickal techniques, and to cast off the divisions and old feuds that kept our elders from functioning well together. I would like to see the cultivation of high standards of teaching, ritual practice, and ethics. I would like to see some more of the solitaires starting to teach.

More about the Faery (Feri) tradition

[top](#)

[TOC](#)

[home](#)

[The Pentacles of Feri](#)

Page updated 01/01/2026

<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/pentacles.html>

25 captures

29 Sep 2001 - 29 Nov 2009

Jan AUG Oct

10

2003 2004 2006

[About this capture](#)

The Feri Pentacles

The Pentacles of Feri are a meditational device which will teach you a lot about yourself. Try meditating on the points of the Iron Pentacle beginning with Sex, then Pride, Self, Power, Passion, and back to Sex--making an invoking pentacle. then try going round the edges from Sex to Self, Passion, Pride, Power, and Sex. Think about the relationships between concepts as well as the meaning of each. Some good links to further study include:

http://www.faerywolf.com/essay_ironpentacle.htm an article by Storm Faerywolf on the pentacles

<http://www.reclaiming.org/newsletter/67/pentacle.html> The Iron Pentacle as a meditative tool, by Hilary Valentine of Reclaiming

<http://www.tejasweb.org/html/writings/epistepentacle.html> Epistemology and the Pentacles of Feri

the Pentacle of Iron

The Feri Pentacle of Iron

the Pentacle of Iron

The Feri Pentacle of Pearl

Comparison of various pentacles

Comparison of various pentacles, including the lead pentacles created by Victor Anderson (V) and Gabriel Carillo (G), respectively.